MARCH
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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

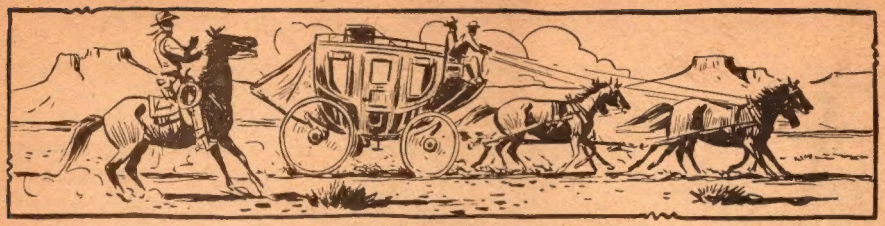
A DELL MAGAZINE
DELL

The Zane Grey Story:
THE GREAT SLAVE

This Month's Novel:
THE HIDE RUSTLERS
by Les Savage, Jr.

Her whole body rose toward him in her demand.

The Hide Rustlers, Chap. 7



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

Vol. 4, No. 1—March, 1950

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Cover picture by George Prout—Frontispiece by R. K. Abbott—
Back cover: "After a Maverick," a painting by Nicholas S. Firfires

Published monthly by

DELL PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.

George T. Delacorte, Jr., *President* • Helen Meyer, *Vice-President* • Albert P. Delacorte, *Vice-President*
261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.

by arrangement with THE HAWLEY PUBLICATIONS, INC. Re-entered as second class matter July 2, 1947, at the post office at New York, New York, under the act of March 3, 1879. Additional second class entry at the post office at Racine, Wisconsin. Printed in the U.S.A. *Copyright, 1950, by The Hawley Publications, Inc.**Address all subscriptions to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, 261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y., or to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Poughkeepsie, New York. Address all manuscripts and editorial correspondence to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Racine, Wisconsin. Single copy, 25c; yearly subscription (12 issues) $3.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, and in the countries of the Pan-American Union; $4.00 in foreign countries, (no Canadian subscriptions accepted). Editor: Don Ward. Advisory editor: Stephen Slesinger.* Designed and produced by Western Printing & Lithographing Company.

THIS MONTH'S COMPLETE NOVEL: *THE HIDE RUSTLERS*

Fear of his own quick passionate rages rides Kenny Blacklaws's shoulders as he returns, after several years' absence, to his home country, the Big Thicket of East Texas. He comes reluctantly, for the letter which has summoned him contains a veiled threat concerning a haunting, tragic episode of his youth. But at the same time he welcomes this chance to test his carefully nurtured self-control—to establish himself as master of his own surging emotions. He gets his initial opportunity soon after his arrival, when John Roman, arrogant owner of the huge Double Sickle spread, who is fighting desperately to keep going in an era of disastrous beef prices and wholesale rustling, finds Kenny skinning a dead Double Sickle steer. Kenny learns that the small ranchers are being championed in their near-hopeless battle against Roman and the cattle association by Quintin Garland, Kenny's stepbrother and bitter boyhood rival. Their old feud flames up anew as Garland discovers that lovely, desirable Corsica Manatte is vitally interested in Kenny, and conflict sharpens when Kenny, attempting to solve the puzzle of the Congo Bog's hidden packery, begins to suspect that Garland is playing some devious game of his own. Except for the uncertain support of Mock Fannin, champion liar of the Big Thicket, Kenny plays a lone hand, undergoing a gruelling encounter with enraged razorbacks in an isolated cabin, torture at the hands of John Roman's sadistic foreman, a suspense-filled midnight stalk in the lonely brush, and a climactic gun battle amid the sand dunes of the Gulf Coast. Violence, danger, a perplexing mystery, a taut psychological situation, and an unusual love story combine to make "The Hide Rustlers" a dramatic, colorful, and intensely readable novel of the Old West.

Coming in next month's issue—the magazine abridgment of

CODE OF THE WEST

Zane Grey's thrilling story of the great Tonto Basin abduction

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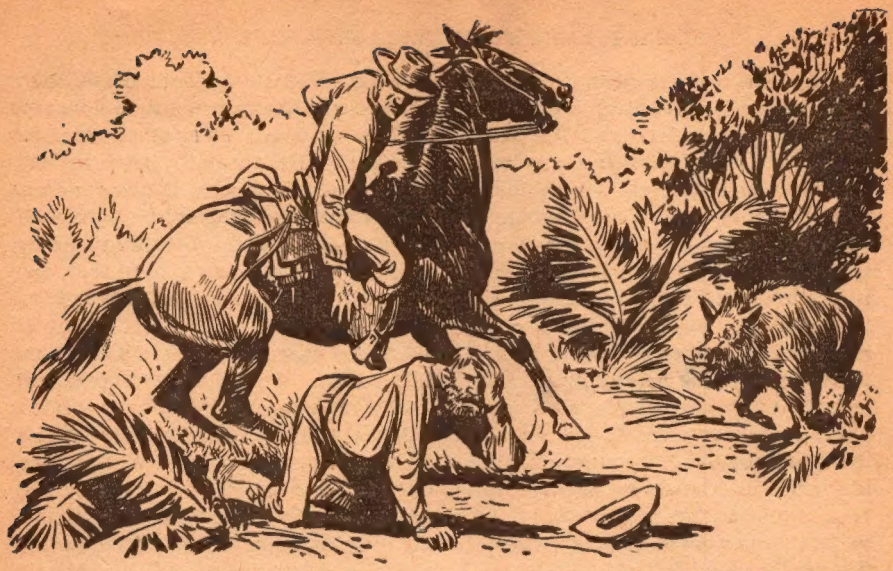
THE STEADFAST, by Wayne D. Overholser
TOO GOOD WITH A GUN, a story by a promising new writer, Lewis B. Patten

Also: **GUNMEN I HAVE MET, a fascinating original article by William MacLeod Raine**

This smashing April issue of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE will be on sale about February 28



The Hide Rustlers

By Les Savage, Jr.

CHAPTER ONE

"Do This Job and We'll Forget!"

KENNY BLACKLAWS found the dead steer about four in the afternoon. It lay in a thick patch of winter-stripped brush about a mile from the Sabine River on the Texas side. Jefferson County was near enough to the Gulf to get its wind—a biting wind that whipped the brim of Blacklaws's hat against his face and made his black mare fiddle-foot nervously beneath him. When he swung off Tar Baby, she started to spook.

He checked the mare and stood against her with his hand on her neck, talking in a crooning voice. It soon quieted the mare, as it always did, and he hitched her to the brush downwind from the dead steer so the smell of blood would not excite her once more. Then he pulled his Bowie knife and walked over to the steer, grimacing faintly with his distaste for the job, as he hunkered down to start skinning the carcass.

Doubled over that way, the tall length of him took on a heavier shape. Most of his weight was really in his chest and shoulders—a quilting of heavy muscles which filled his faded

ducking jacket so completely that the seams spread whenever a turning motion put any strain on them. The bones of his face bore that heavy-framed strength. But they were set obliquely together, lending his cheeks and jaws a keen, sharpened look. There was a fine sculpturing to his mouth, with a latent humor curling its tips. But that was spoiled by his eyes. They were recessed deeply beneath a sharply jutting brow. With his face in repose, they were filled with a darkness that seemed to come from long ago. It subdued the youth and humor of him, till he looked older than his twenty-six years.

His attention seemed to be on his job, but he remained acutely aware of each small sound that filled the desolate thickets about him. He let the corner of a glance now and then cross to the bindweed and agrita that stood as high as a horse's withers in many places, broken on the horizon by small green islands of post oaks.

The black mare fretted restlessly, eyes rolling like white china toward the surrounding thickets as they rattled their winter skeletons in the wind. Blacklaws was about halfway through his job when Tar Baby tossed her head and whinnied. He stopped working till he heard the distant popping crash, different from the rattle of wind.

I've skinned enough animals now, he thought. *I've left my trail open for whoever wants to follow. It's about time somebody came.*

He was still peeling off the tough hide when the three horsemen threaded their way from the thicket. The man in the lead sat his short-coupled Billy horse in the ostentatious seat a heavy-gutted man so often adopted.

The immense girth of him made Blacklaws's big frame look small. He was hatless, his bald head shaped like a bullet, the flesh turned luminous yellow in the pearly light of the sunless afternoon. His eyelids were merely creases in the pawky pouches of fat that contained his eyes. He reined in his Billy horse and sat leaning heavily into the cantle, staring with that carnal grin Blacklaws remembered so well.

"Heard you was back, Kenny," he said at last. "Wouldn't have recognized you. They must feed well up north."

Blacklaws had come to his feet, and he returned the man's grin. It spread outward into his face, deepening the wind-tracks in his bronze cheeks and drawing together the fine-grained network of wrinkles about his faintly squinting eyes.

"Nine years changes a man, Roman," he said.

John Roman's grin broadened. "It does, Kenny. It does. Folks wondered why you left. They'll be wondering why you came back."

Blacklaws was still smiling. "Do you wonder, Roman?"

The other man stared at him a moment longer, then threw his head back in a surprising burst of laughter—guttural and explosive. "I never wondered why you lit a shuck, Kenny. I would have run away long before you did. I never saw a man treat his boy the way your father treated you."

At last the smile fled Blacklaws's face. "Not my father."

Roman sobered abruptly too. "My apologies, Kenny. Your *stepfather*. I guess you *would* be touchy about that. You picked a poor time to leave the country, though, Kenny, the same day he was killed. There was a lot of talk."

"Did it come to anything?"

Roman shrugged. "Most folks

wouldn't have blamed you if you killed Martin Garland." He paused, studying Blacklaws. "Did you—Kenny?"

"Do you think I'd come back if I had?"

Roman's chuckle was the scrape of a rusty saw. "I guess not, Kenny."

The other two men had not spoken, holding their fiddling horses in subservient silence to John Roman. Blacklaws's attention came momentarily to them, now. He knew Agate Ayers, a tall alley-cat of a man, with hemp for hair and saddle leather for skin. His narrow shoulders were carried in a perpetual stoop, lending a deep concavity to his chest.

The other man was new to Blacklaws. He rode a black horse with a coat so slick the dampness of this fog lent it a glossy sheen. His clothes too were an unrelieved black. There was something Creole to the way he clubbed his long hair at the base of his neck, and to his depthless black eyes, holding Blacklaws in an unwinking stare.

"That's Gauche Sallier, Kenny," Roman said. "He used to punch cattle over on the Louisiana side."

Blacklaws looked at the man's feminine hands, the flesh unmarred by any rope scars. "That must have been a long time ago," he said.

Sallier made some sharp movement in the saddle, but Roman's voice halted it. "Take it easy, Gauche. Kenny's a man who can read sign like an Indian. It was just an observation." He looked down at Blacklaws. "You don't want to aggravate Gauche, Kenny. He's touchy as a steer with heel flies." There was another pause, and then Roman asked, "Why did you come back, Kenny?"

"Man's rope frays out sometimes, Roman."

"You would have done better to let it fray out up north," Roman said. "Didn't they tell you about the Skinning War that's going on down here? Meat don't bring enough money in the northern markets to make a drive worthwhile, and nobody's buying cattle in Texas. All a steer's good for is its hide and horns. The only big operators that have managed to keep their heads above water are the ones that sell the hides and pack their own meat."

"They told me all about that," Blacklaws answered. "They told me hides down here are just like mavericks used to be. The skin of a dead cow belongs to whoever finds it."

"Only hide rustlers have been taking advantage of that custom and killing any cow they come across for its hide," Roman said. "Everybody who don't own any beef is out slaughtering somebody else's for the hides. It's driving out what big operators are left." He grasped the horn of his saddle, squeezing it till the great cords in his wrists popped faintly. "It isn't driving me out, Kenny. Nobody's taking the hides off my cattle, dead or alive. You must have known this was one of my Double Sickle steers, but I'll let it pass this time. I'll give you this warning now. Don't ever let me catch you taking a Double Sickle hide again."

"I always observed the customs of the country, Roman."

Roman's eyes squinted almost shut. "What does that mean?"

"I came back looking to keep from starving to death, Roman. A little man's got to exist, same as a big one. Hides are selling for fifty cents apiece in Galveston, and King Wallace told me he'd haul whatever hides I got whenever he went down there. I'll leave your live steers alone. But it's

still not thought dishonest to take a hide off a dead steer."

"Not my hides, Kenny. Hand this one up."

The wind caught Blacklaws's hat in a new blast, whipping the brim against his face. "No, Roman. I skinned this hide. I'll keep it."

Roman spoke heavily. "Gauche, climb down and get that hide."

The Creole slid off his horse without any lost effort. He dropped the reins over the black's head and then handed them back up to Agate without looking at the man. His eyes were turgid as ink, holding Blacklaws's gaze.

"Will you give me the hide, *M'sieu*?" he asked.

"No," Blacklaws said.

"Will you step back, then, and let me pick it up?"

"No."

There was another moment drained of sound and movement. Without taking his gaze from the Creole, Blacklaws saw how avid the light in Roman's eyes had become. He knew Roman and Agate meant to back up Sallier, if the Creole could not do it alone.

"Very well, *M'sieu*," said Sallier.

He moved forward, bending casually to reach for the hide. Blacklaws lunged at him. The Creole's instant reaction revealed he had been expecting this. But he had not counted on so much speed from such a heavy man, and did not jump far or fast enough.

Blacklaws caught the left-handed man before his gun was completely out. He clutched Sallier's free right arm and swung him off-balance and then pulled him around in a whipping half-circle. When the arc was completed, Sallier stood with his back in against Blacklaws and his freed gun pointed helplessly at Roman.

At the same time, Agate Ayers dropped the reins of the black, and Roman tugged his bearskin coat aside to go for his own gun. With Sallier against him, Blacklaws caught that gun arm down at the wrist. Sallier gave a vicious heave, trying to tear loose. But Blacklaws twisted his arm so hard he dropped the gun with a cry of pain. Then Blacklaws put the flat of his hand against the Creole's back and gave him a heaving shove.

The man staggered heavily forward into Roman's horse. The beast whinnied shrilly and reared up. Roman had to forget about his gun to fight the animal. His reining pirouetted the beast around to smash against Agate's horse.

Before they got control of their animals, Blacklaws picked up Sallier's gun. Roman finally got his Billy horse back down, and Agate managed to quiet his dun. His gun was out, and he wheeled the animal back, but when he saw the weapon in Blacklaws's hand, he stopped. He had a twangy, nasal voice.

"Ain't that a sack of hell," he said.

Blacklaws said nothing, standing heavily there until Agate slipped his gun back into its holster. Sallier wheeled to face Blacklaws.

"You should not have done that, *M'sieu*," he barely whispered.

Blacklaws ignored him, watching Roman. "Don't ever put your heel-dogs on me that way again," he told the man.

Roman's own anger mottled his face with diffused blood. Finally he got himself under control. Puzzlement robbed him of some of the anger.

"You don't seem very mad, Kenny," he frowned.

Blacklaws laughed suddenly. It made his face look young again. He tossed Sallier's gun to the man's feet.

"You'll never make me mad, Roman," he said. "But you'll never do anything like that again and get off so easy, either. Now go back to your hide factory. This skin's mine and I'm keeping it."

After the three men had left, Blacklaws stood in the deepening twilight, listening to the rustle of their passage out through the thickets fade and die.

They didn't make me mad. That kept going through him triumphantly. *They tried like hell, and they didn't make me mad.*

Finally he turned to finish skinning the carcass. Then he lashed it on back of his saddle, and mounted, reining the animal back toward the Sabine. He found the river road and followed it southward. Behind him about four miles was the town of Copper Bluffs, and before him was the Manatte plantation. Or what was left of it.

Where the long drive entered the river road, he pulled up. The house was out of sight, hidden in the grove of post oaks, but he could remember too well what it looked like, with its slender colonettes and its long gallery set high on brick piers. And he could remember Corsica, standing on that gallery, waiting for him—

He blocked off his impulse to turn in, glancing down at his blood-grimed hands and dirty clothes. He could not see her in this condition, after so many years. He gigged Tar Baby on southward, topping bluffs that overlooked the twisting river, black and silken in the failing light. But he was still thinking of Corsica Manatte, admitting to himself that his reluctance to see her went deeper than his present appearance. It went back nine years and stopped in a dank bayou somewhere west of the river. He wondered if Corsica had heard the talk too. Undoubtedly. And it would be lying between them whenever they met, putting a blight on their meeting; it was what had kept him from calling on her.

Six miles south of the Manatte house he turned off the road onto an old cattle trail that dipped immediately into the woolly dusk that filled a dense stand of loblolly pine and chinquapin. These thinned out into a broad prairie thick with saw-bladed salt grass. He slopped through stagnant water which pooled the low points, salty enough to leave deposits of brine at its edges that held a luminous gleam in the last light of day. He heard the Smoky Canes before he saw them, whipped by the wind till they slashed at each other like sabers, setting up an unholy clatter. He trotted through the last stand of post oaks, ducking grapevines that hung from the trees in loops thick as a man's wrist, and broke into a clearing by this cane brake, where the old, crumbling line cabin stood.

He unsaddled his horse and put it in the pen and carried his rigging round to the front. As he stepped around the corner, his eyes automatically picked up the fresh signs about the door.

This halted him, put him back around the corner of the shack. He lowered his saddle to the ground and then stood with his back against the unpeeled logs, hand on his gun. There were no hoofprints. That meant the man had hidden his horse in the canes or the timber. And there had been no

attempt to erase the bootprints. The heels had been flat. That excluded a cattleman.

"Carew?" he called softly.

"Never mind, Kenny, boy," answered a man, from within the shack. "I ain't staked out to cut you down."

Blacklaws swung around the corner and to the door, pushing it open and going through and then taking a step aside so he would not be skylighted. Charlie Carew's boots scraped softly against the puncheon floor; the hurricane lamp clinked as he lifted its top, struck a match.

The lamp flared into life, its saffron glow stamping Carew's face against the darkness in a bold intaglio. He sat in the only chair in the room, a paunchy man in a rumpled frock coat and frayed broadcloth pants. His stovepipe hat lay on the table, and thinning hair was combed carefully across the protuberant bulge of his head.

"How did you know it would be me?" he asked.

Blacklaws moved over to the Dutch oven, squatted down to lift a length of cottonwood from a pile beside this, stirring the ashes level before he put it in. Then he got kindling and planted it, and started his fire.

"You were the one who wrote the letter to Laramie Grange," he said. "I figured you'd be the one to meet me here. When you didn't show up right away, I supposed you wanted it secret. So I didn't look you up."

Carew pulled a cigar butt from his pocket, thrust it into his mouth, and began chewing complacently on it.

"Always figuring things out, ain't you, Kenny? I never saw such a man. All right. Here's why I didn't want anybody knowing you were hooked up with me. We're up against it. Under ordinary conditions, with beef selling at decent prices, that custom of a dead cow's hide belonging to the man who finds it is all right. But when the hide is the only thing left that's worth any money, the result is pretty obvious. They used to rustle cattle. Now they're rustling hides. Most of the rustlers are working alone or in small bunches. But here in Jefferson County—"

"They've got an organization," supplied Blacklaws.

"That's a mortal fact. This organized bunch is the one that's driving the Jefferson Cattle Association crazy. If they keep on they'll have every big operator in the county out of business. The worst of it is, they've got a packery of their own hidden somewhere. Instead of killing the cows where they find them and skinning them on the spot, they can drive a big cut to their packery, and skin them at their leisure."

Blacklaws rose from the fire, shrugging out of his ducking jacket and turning to hang it on a peg. "And you haven't been able to locate this hidden packery."

"A mortal fact. That's what we want you to do, Kenny. You know how much of the Big Thicket has never been seen by white man. You know there isn't anybody who's been through Congo Bog. There's an awful lot of this country that isn't known."

"They've still got to ship the hides out. Have you watched the coast?"

"Like a hawk. The only ones shipping out that way are John Roman due south of here and Allen and Poole way over on Galveston Island." Carew chewed meditatively on his cigar, studying Blacklaws. "My men and I are too well known around here to get any place. You know the country, the

people. Yet you've been away long enough to have no known connection with any particular factions. Last but not least, we know how good the work was you were doing for the Laramie Grange Association up in Wyoming."

"We?"

Carew tilted back in the chair, chuckling. "Don't worry. None of the cattlemen in the Jefferson Association know why you're back. There are about six stock detectives working for the association now. I run the department. I'm the only one who knows about your undercover work for Laramie Grange, or who knows why you're here."

"John Roman doesn't know, then?"

The man's chuckle shook his pouchy belly. "Not a bit of it. I hear you had a run-in with him today."

"You really got your lines out."

"I came across Roman on the trail. You must have gone right to work."

"It took me a couple of days to see how things stood. I could guess just about what you'd want me to do. If it got around that I was rustling a few hides on my own, there would be less suspicion that I was connected with you. It might even get me into the confidence of other rustlers."

Carew chewed industriously at his stogie. "Haven't changed a bit, have you? Always figuring things out. Even as a kid. Always something working in that mind." He grunted. "You achieved your purpose, anyway. Roman is already thinking of you as a hide rustler. It will get around."

"In your letter, you mentioned the Manattes," Blacklaws said.

"I thought that would help bring you back. You still in love with Corsica?"

"I was only seventeen when I left. A kid that age doesn't know what he feels."

"And yet part of the reason you come back was for her. You think she's in trouble and you want to help her."

"You implied they were mixed in this somehow."

"Phil Manatte's doing something," murmured Carew. "I don't know what yet. But he's mixed up in something."

Blacklaws frowned. "I can't believe Corsica would have anything to do with it."

"People do strange things when their backs are up against the wall." Carew grinned suddenly, peering intently at Blacklaws. "Maybe she was the *whole* reason you came back."

This brought Blacklaws around to face the man. The raw, bleak expression in his face was plain, now. His chin tilted slightly. It changed the shadows on his face, turning the eye-sockets to sooty pools, from which the whites of his eyes gleamed enigmatic as marble. Carew's teeth clamped down on the cigar.

"I thought something more than the Manattes was on your mind, Kenny."

"Don't cat-and-mouse me, Carew," Blacklaws said, in a strained voice.

Carew sighed heavily, dropping the chair back down to its front legs and planting his feet solidly on the floor. "All right. What would you like to know?"

"Your letter was very cleverly worded, Carew. The president of Laramie Grange wanted to know what Martin Garland's death had to do with the hide rustling."

Carew grinned faintly. "Nothing. You know I put that in there for you alone. I said we'd found out who murdered Martin Garland. I thought that would bring you back. Your foster fa-

ther had a lot of enemies. When he was killed out there in Bayou Lafitte it didn't cause much sorrow. But the fact that you disappeared the same night made a lot of talk. There was no proof, so that died down. Then this hide rustling broke out. We combed things pretty fine, Kenny. A lot of funny clues have popped up. First it was Martin Garland's bullwhip, that had disappeared at the time of his death. Then it was a man who had seen Martin Garland killed."

All the breath seemed to leave Blacklaws's body. "Who?"

Carew removed the cigar absently from his mouth. Then he glanced at it, and a disgusted snort fluttered his bulbous nose. He flung the butt from him.

"Damn things," he muttered. "Think I was a cow or something, chewing my cud." He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. Then he settled a little in the chair. "It doesn't actually matter to me just who killed Martin Garland. On the other hand—" the chair creaked beneath his small shift—"we need this job done. You're about our last bet. So look at it this way. We have no official interest in the death of Martin Garland. Do this job, and we'll forget what we found out."

"And if I don't do the job?"

Carew looked uncomfortable. "You must have known the answer to that, Kenny, or you wouldn't have come back. I guess you know your stepbrother is practicing law in Copper Bluffs now. If Quintin Garland ever got his hands on evidence proving who killed his father, he wouldn't quit till he had the man hanged, Kenny." Carew's eyes squinted slyly. "Especially if he had hated that man to begin with."

The light caught a savage flash in Blacklaws's eyes, and his body jerked sharply with an impulse he could not abort. Carew straightened in the chair, one hand darting out to grasp the edge of the table.

"Won't do you any good to get mad, Kenny."

Blacklaws continued to look at him a moment. Then he turned away from the man, facing the fire.

"Get out," he said.

Carew's boots scraped the floor as he rose.

I'm not mad, Blacklaws thought savagely. *You can't make me mad.* "Just get out," he said.

The puncheons shook with Carew's ambling passage to the door. Opening this, he paused. "I'll be around in about a week, Kenny. I'll want some kind of word then. And I hope you aren't planning on quitting the job so soon. It would be the second big mistake of your life."

Chapter Two

Way Down Inside a Man

QUINTIN GARLAND stood dismally at the windows of his law offices in the French House, looking out over Copper Bluffs, a bitter frustration robbing his mind of any directed thought. Absently his eyes found the jetties, thrusting their rotten pilings out into the Sabine below the bluffs, as if to snag what meager river traffic remained to this forgotten town. From here, the river road shelved its treacherous and crumbling path up the face of the coppery clay bluffs to the first buildings of town.

The fog banks crawled up this road,

rising from the river to twist through the town in oppressive layers, rent here and there by the passage of a forlorn rider or a heavy freight wagon laboring through the muck. The somber mood filled Garland darkly, turning his mind to the defeat, the bitterness this town had brought him in the last five years.

He was a tall man, narrow without being thin, a sense of tensile strength to the keen line of his body in its dark broadcloth. His hair was the color of amber, changing hues when the slightest motion of his head shifted the light upon it. His aquiline face held a sardonic look, and there was the restless quest of a hunting hawk in his deep-set eyes.

"Brooding again, Quintin?"

The lawyer wheeled sharply. He had not heard anyone enter. The door was open, however, and the woman stood there, regarding him from those great solemn eyes that had always disturbed him so.

She made a tall, roundly formed shape in the rectangle of the door, a pork-pie hat set jauntily on her abundant black hair, the uplifted depth of her breasts pushing insistently against the lapels of her dark cloak. The dim light of the room turned the texture of her flesh to satin, and lent a dusky sensuality to the ripeness of her lips. Her face held a broad, strong beauty through the cheekbones, but they were set high, and slanted sharply inward, so that the faint shadows lying obliquely beneath them had always given her features a faintly Oriental cast, for Garland.

"You didn't tell me you'd be in town today, Corsica," Garland said.

Corsica Manatte smiled. "Dee drove me in. We were looking for Phil to be back from Houston today. I guess he's been delayed." The smile faded, and she moved impulsively toward him. "You shouldn't let the outcome of the trial depress you so, Quintin. You did your best. I was surprised at such a hard decision."

"Decision, decision," Quintin said in a burst of savagery. "The jury didn't make any decision. They knew how they were going to rule before the judge sat down. The foreman of the jury used to work for Roman."

"But you still have no reason—"

"No reason to what?" he said, wheeling on her. "Roman's out to break me, can't you see that? Jesse Tanner shot that Obermier rider in self-defense. Just because they found Jesse with a few Obermier hides—"

She shook her head. "All you had was Jesse Tanner's word that the Obermier rider drew before he did. And the court proved definitely that Jesse had taken those hides from fresh-killed steers."

"That's the point. The only issue was rustling. In any other court they would have dropped the murder count. It was a clear case of self-defense—"

"It wasn't clear. If Jesse hadn't been rustling, his word that the Obermier rider drew first might have stood. But the attendant circumstances were so damning—"

"Obermier would do well to have you prosecute the next case."

A hurt look darkened her eyes. "Quintin, don't be like that."

He shook his head, turning partly away from her. "I can't help it, Corsica. If you've lost faith in me too, I don't have anything left. All the people I've fought for are losing confidence in me. Can't you see what Roman's doing? This is the sixth case now that I've lost

in three months—"

He trailed off at the confused shock in her widening eyes. "A man's going to be hanged," she said. "They're building the gallows for Jesse Tanner right now. And all you can think of is that you've lost another case."

The bitterness washed from his face, leaving it sober and contrite, and he went over and caught her by the elbows, speaking intensely. "Forgive me, Corsica. You're right. My failure is so insignificant beside the main issue. It was blind of me."

She held back from him, studying his face. "Quintin, when you first came back from Austin, and said you'd decided to give up that wonderful job because you thought the little men needed you more back here, I was so proud of you. The small operators have needed a champion for so long, with Roman and Sharpe and Obermier in control. But now—"

He waited for her to finish, and when she didn't, he asked, "Now—what?"

She seemed to lift against him, almost whispering it. "Make me stay proud of you, Quintin."

It brought one of his rare smiles, transforming his face for that moment, erasing the hungry hollows beneath his cheeks and robbing his eyes of their sharpness. He pulled her tight and kissed her. But even as he did it, some of the eagerness seemed to leave the lips, and they lost tension beneath his. He took his mouth off and held her away from him.

"What is it?"

She pulled gently free, turned to walk to the window, stood there looking out a minute. Then she faced back to him.

"I had something in my mind when I came up. It was driven out by that talk of the trial. It came back just then."

"What?"

"Quintin—" she hesitated, her face darkening, then almost forced herself on— "Quintin, did you know that Kenny Blacklaws is back?"

He could not hide his reaction to that. The surprise of it left his mind blank. He felt the blood drain from his face. A pulse seemed to break out in his temple. He turned away so that she could not see the depth of his feeling. He walked to the desk, taking hold of its edge. Finally he spoke, low and guttural, almost to himself.

"Why should he be back? Why?"

The throaty tones of her voice condemned him. "You can't still hate him that much."

"Why not?" he said bitterly.

"Because nobody else disliked him. Why were you two always fighting?"

"We lived together thirteen years," he said. "Isn't that enough?"

"No," she said. "Not for feeling this way."

"I've got my reasons," he said.

"What reasons?"

"Why do you ask it that way?" he said.

"What way?"

"As if you already know."

She shook her head impatiently. "I don't know what you're talking about. If you have reasons for hating Kenny so, haven't I a right to know them?"

"You wouldn't want to know," he said. "It's between Blacklaws and me, that's all."

"If he couldn't make out up north, he has as much right here as you," she said.

Garland turned to face her. "How can you stand up for him?"

"I'm not standing up for him," she

said heatedly. "Every time I try to take a decent, adult view of things, you accuse me of turning against you."

"Then why can't you see what he's doing? He knows I'm here. He knows the two of us can't stay in the same town. He had the whole world. Why should it be here—"

The expression of her face stopped him. "I think I'd better go, Quintin," she told him, turning away.

He reached out for her. "Corsica—"

"No," she said. "I think I'd better go."

He stood at the window after she left. He could not see the street below. His whole mind seemed filled with Kenny Blacklaws. And it was taking him deep into the past.

Quintin's own mother had died at his birth. His father had married a widow, Martha Blacklaws, when Quintin was seven. Her son, Kenny, had been four at the time. There had been a tacit antipathy between Kenny and Quintin from the beginning. And when Martha had died of pneumonia, two years later, Kenny Blacklaws was just old enough to begin fighting Quintin. From that moment on, Garland could remember no moment of friendship or rapport, nothing but a maddeningly self-contained little devil, tormenting him constantly. Blacklaws seemed a room closed and locked to the Garlands, something neither Quintin nor his father could ever see or reach or understand, with processes of mind so different from theirs he might have been born on another world. No amount of the beatings Martin Garland had given the boy mitigated that stubborn withdrawal.

And the mind. Garland could still remember watching that mind develop. Not particularly brilliant or versatile, yet almost frightening in its methodical capacities for reading the meaning of all the little signs life left in its wake.

Yet these earlier memories of Blacklaws faded before that last remembrance. It lay out there in the brush, where Bayou Lafitte backed up into a marsh, a few hundred yards south of the Garland home. It was night. Nine years ago. Quintin Garland was a twenty-year-old youth returning home from a day in the cottonfields. An empty house. The bullwhip gone from its peg on the wall. It seemed Martin Garland was always down at the marsh with his stepson, and that whip.

After half an hour of waiting, Quintin went down there too. He found his father. There was no stepson, and no whip. But there was his father, there was Martin Garland, lying half-buried in the mud to one side of the trail, his head so beaten by a rock his face was unrecognizable—

Garland snapped himself from the hateful reverie with effort, realizing how long he had stood at the window. He turned to get his castoff army greatcoat and shrug into it, leaving the office. There was still a group loitering on the sagging steps of the two-story frame courthouse, across the street from the French House, when Garland came onto the street. He saw Roman's bald head, and Gauche Sallier's black figure.

"Evening, Counselor," laughed Roman. "Coming to the hanging?"

Garland thrust his hands deep into the pocket of his coat and turned away to walk west on the street, bitter lines etching his face. There was no point in letting those fools goad him. There would come a day when all of them were on their knees to him, little and

big alike.

In this vitriolic mood, he got his horse from the livery stable, a handsome copperbottom, given to him by a client in lieu of cash. It was one of the few things of distinction left him, but he took no pleasure in its beauty, as he trotted down Colonial Street, the main avenue that ran for a few blocks across the high plateau upon which the bulk of the town was situated, and then dipped abruptly down into the hollow land behind the bluffs.

His home lay some ten miles west of Copper Bluffs, just off this wagon road, at the head of Bayou Lafitte. He was soon deeply submerged in the brushy land which constituted the eastern fringe of the Big Thicket. He trotted his horse moodily through the tangle of thorny catclaw and mesquite, skirting pot-holes that rendered up a foul odor of stagnant water and rotten mud.

How could people love this land, the way Corsica and Mock and all the others seemed to? It was a hateful purgatory to him. He tried to shrug it away. He would be leaving soon enough. One way or another, he would get out. He wasn't going to waste his talents on a stupid, greasy-sack town like Copper Bluffs. One boost, just one step up, and he'd be on his way back to Austin, he'd take Corsica and—

The copperbottom spooked suddenly, almost unseating Garland as it jumped aside. With a curse, he reined the animal back into the trail. But the horse shied again, trying to rear. He spun it around to bring the beast back down, and saw what was the matter.

They came around a turn ahead, grunting deep in their throats—a whole file of canebrake hogs, led by a spotted boar. It was low-slung and razor-backed, tusks gleaming like wicked scimitars from its bewhiskered lower jaw. With sight of the horse, the leader halted sharply, the others bunching up behind him, one upon the other, in a snorting pack, their tusks clashing against each other. Then the man appeared around the turn.

He was dressed in a ragged Mexican blanket worn poncho style, with a hole in the center, through which was thrust his head, leaving the four tails to dangle grotesquely about the hips of his rawhide leggins. He had a vacant, bucolic face, with a shallow jaw and suspicious little eyes that never remained focused long on one spot. He walked around the grunting hogs, tapping at their rumps with the rotten corn cob he had been using to tole them with.

"Evenin', Garland."

"I wish to hell you'd give some kind of warning, Tate," Garland swore, still fighting the fretting copperbottom. "Isn't a horse in the county you haven't spooked with those razorbacks of yours."

Tate's bare feet had the prehensile length of a monkey's, with black tufts of hair just behind the knobby joint of each toe. He curled these toes into the ooze, grinning in childish pleasure at the small chuckling sound this brought.

"Gotta git my hogs gathered in. King Wallace and his crowd are whipping up a hog hunt. Ain't going to render none of my piney-rooters up for lard." A childish transition of mood robbed his face of its vacant look, filling it with something vicious. "Think they kin take advantage of old Tate. Think they kin kill his hogs. He can't take their cows, kin he? Cut down one of Roman's longhorns they'd kill him. Take one of Obermier's hides they'd hang

him. But they kin have old Tate's hogs. Go right ahead and kill 'em. Those little piney-rooters are all he's got in the world, but it don't matter, jist go right ahead and kill 'em—"

He spat suddenly, and wiped the back of a grimy hand across his slack mouth. "Well, maybe old Tate *kin* do somethin'. They'll find out. Anybody take out after my hogs it maybe won't be the hogs that git rendered up for lard—"

Garland broke in impatiently, he had heard this tirade so often before. "You been south?"

Tate looked up in surprise, lips still parted. Then a cunning expression tucked in his eyes.

"It ain't down in Congo Bog, Garland."

"What isn't?"

"The hide factory where all these rustlers taking the hides to be stripped off. It ain't down in Congo Bog."

"What makes you think I meant that?"

"I kin look inside a man, Garland. I kin read a man's heart. Lots of people like to know where that hidden packery is. But you'd like to know for different reasons than most." Tate frowned at him. "You're a lawyer-man, Garland. Wouldn't you have to turn the rustlers in if you found who they was?"

Garland stared down at the man, trying to read what lay in the vacuous face. Then he leaned confidingly toward Tate.

"Just suppose I didn't turn them in. Suppose I knew a way they could keep up their hide rustling even on a larger scale, and never be touched by John Roman or any of the big operators."

Tate chuckled. "Do you think the rustlers would let you in on it if you gave them something like that? Do you think it would make you lots of money, Garland?"

"I didn't say that."

"Neither did Kenny Blacklaws."

Garland bent sharply toward him. "Blacklaws?"

"Charlie Carew was at the line shack where Blacklaws is staying. Blacklaws met him there. I saw them from the Smoky Canes."

"Carew?" murmured Garland. "Why should Carew want to see Blacklaws?"

Tate grinned slyly. "Carew wants to know where the packery is, doesn't he?"

"But—Blacklaws."

"Haven't you been wondering why Blacklaws come back?"

Garland did not answer the man, gripped by his own thoughts. The hogs had scattered off the trail now, rooting through the thickets. But one great sow with a scaly hide tinted a strange luminous blue had worked her way back to Tate, and stood rubbing up against the man's leg like an affectionate cat. Tate tapped the corn cob absently against her sharp back.

"Know what the lawyer-man's thinking, Teacup?" he asked the sow. "He's thinking it would be too bad if Kenny Blacklaws had been brought back by Carew. Blacklaws, now, he's a smart man. Out of all the men on the river, he might be just the one to find that hidden hide factory. Wouldn't that be too bad? Then the lawyer-man'd never get a chance to tell the hide rustlers his scheme. Never get a chance to make himself a lot of money."

"Tate," said Garland softly. "Kenny used to go on those hog hunts with Mock Fannin, when he was a kid. Did he ever kill one of your hogs?"

The sly humor was swept from Tate abruptly, and he was like a child with

a tantrum. "If he did he'd pay for it. Think they kin kill old Tate's hogs, they'll find out, think they kin kill my piney-rooters, it's them that'll git killed—"

"Is it, Tate?"

The hog-toler broke off his vitriolic tirade. He stared up at Garland, and the slyness made indented pouches of his eyes, and he grinned blandly. "Why don't you just hire somebody to shoot Blacklaws, if you want him out of the way?"

"I didn't say I wanted him out of the way."

"Then what are you saying?"

"Have I ever killed one of your hogs, Tate?"

"Maybe."

Garland stiffened. "You know I've never been on a hog hunt in my life."

Tate cackled like an old woman. "Maybe some day you'll find out. Maybe someday you will."

Lips compressed, Garland frowned at him. Finally he said, "You never did say whether Blacklaws killed a hog of yours."

"You think that's my price, Garland?"

"Every man has one, they say."

The man glowered at the ground. "Not today."

"When?"

Tate bobbed the corn cob against the blue sow's back again, staring vacantly into the timber. "Lawyer-man thinks Blacklaws is hunting the packery too, now, Teacup. Afraid Blacklaws will find it before he can. But that ain't the only reason Garland wants Blacklaws out of the way, is it? You 'n' me, we kin read men's hearts, can't we, Teacup? We kin look way down inside a man. Down to where it's been like a canker for nine years, like a big sore he can't heal. Down to where he's thought all this time Kenny Blacklaws killed his pa. Down to where he wants Blacklaws dead for it."

Chapter Three

The Whip

CORSICA MANATTE dressed for dinner, though there was no occasion. It had been too long since she had done this, or anything gay and frivolous and exciting. One of the few decent dresses she had left was the dark green moire, draped at the hip, with enough *décolleté* to reveal the gleaming upper swell of her breasts. She worked her black hair into an upsweep, pinning it with the ivory comb Phil had brought her from Houston, and put on her onyx earrings. The tarnished Adamesque mirror commanding her bedroom reflected a tall, handsome woman with a strikingly ripened body at breast and hip, light from the high candle sconces dropping strong shadows beneath the broad obliquity of her cheekbones to accent that faintly exotic cast of her face.

But somehow it gave her none of the pleasure it should. It was Quintin, she decided, and this afternoon. Why were they always quarreling lately?

She got a Cashmere shawl and swung it around her bare shoulders and went downstairs in this subdued mood. The only servant left to the Manattes was an immense Negress who had stayed on after the emancipation, held by the ties and affections of the lifetime she had spent serving the family. Corsica looked in on Letty to make sure dinner was coming along all right, and then

moved restlessly out to the front gallery. From one shadowed end of this, the monotonous creak of her father's cane rocker quarreled at her. Since the death of his wife, almost eight years ago, Troy Manatte had sunk into a pathetic senility, dwelling mostly in the past.

She went on down the steps and walked out the *allee* which curved its way between untended cypresses to the river road. Her younger brother had not yet come back from Houston, and she was worried.

The house rose bleakly into a tawny dusk behind her. The old French pan tiles on the roof were crumbling, patched in many places by split cypress shingles, and the slender colonettes supporting the gallery overhang had been left unpainted so long they were turned almost black by weathering.

Yet, she realized, the family was lucky to possess it, even in this state. It was only at her mother's insistence that they had put some of their cotton money into Northern investments before the war. That war, and its following upheavals had wiped out most of the big families. Those investments were all that allowed the Manattes to hang on. The payments came quarterly, from the old family lawyer in Houston who still handled the stocks and bonds. Once in a while it was late, and Phil would go to Houston to borrow against it.

Corsica reached the river road, with the vague murmur of the waters sighing up against her from the foot of the bluffs. She stood there a long time. Finally she caught sight of a rider coming around the turn in the river road. In this dusk he was featureless, and she voiced her natural assumption.

"Phil?"

There was a pause, as he came on, and then he answered. "No, Corsica, it isn't Phil."

The rider's figure made a heavy-shouldered stain against the patina of dying day. His face seemed to swim into focus.

"Kenny," she said, in a small voice.

He drew up a pace from her, his quiet smile lighting his face. "Evening, Corsica," he said.

"You've been back a long time," she murmured, at last, "to make this your first visit."

"I didn't actually mean to drop in tonight," he said. "I've been pretty busy."

She sensed something withheld in him. It matched the reserve she felt in herself, and put a barrier between them. As if he felt it too, the smile faded from his face.

He was so much bigger and heavier than she remembered, his shoulders filled out the faded blue ducking jacket so massively. Every part of him seemed to emanate that immense, leashed strength. His hands lay one atop the other on the saddle horn, their very quiescence an expression of latent force. Weather had colored his face darkly and etched a fine graining into the flesh, and the edges of his shaggy hair lay ink-black against the mahogany tint of this. In the poor light, his eyes were inky as his hair, and she searched vainly for the kindling of little lights that could make them glow so warmly. The whole watchful somberness of his face almost frightened her. Then it fled, and that smile returned, bringing its boyishness to him.

It brought Blacklaws back to her as she had known him before, with a poignant rush, and she knew she wanted his easy friendship once more with an

eagerness she had not felt in years.

"We'd be glad to have you for dinner, Kenny. Dad's asked several times."

His smile broadened, he tilted his head in acceptance, and climbed off his horse to walk beside her back down the drive.

"You'll have so much to tell," she said. "It's like you've spent nine years in a foreign land."

"Not much to tell. Cattle in Wyoming. Stockyards in Kansas. Nothing but bread and beans at either. Even that gave out finally."

She realized he would give no more elaboration than this, and was not surprised. He had shown this reticence even as a boy. A shrill voice broke against them from the dusk.

"That you, Phil?"

"No, Dad, it's me. I found Kenny Blacklaws."

There was a sharp scraping sound, and then Troy Manatte's bent figure was crossing the lighted rectangles of French windows. He was bent with age, most of his weight thrust against a malacca cane. His white hair foamed off his head like a snowy nimbus. The myriad seams of his face were furry with senility, and his palsied hands were beginning to show the transparency of age. He swayed toward Blacklaws, squinting intensely.

"Martin let you come tonight, Kenny?"

Corsica said, "Dad, that was nine years ago."

His eyes fluttered to her, face blank for an instant. Then he frowned pathetically and shook his head.

"Nine years," he mumbled. "Seems like yesterday."

"Kenny's been up north," Corsica told the old man, not yet sure this was clear to him. "He just came back. You remember."

"Yeah." Troy Manatte's fuzzy Adam's apple bobbed with his chuckle. "Well, a man's got to sow his wild oats, don't he, Kenny?"

Before Blacklaws could answer, there was the muffled sound of a horse coming up the outer drive. The darkness, now, was so thick that Corsica could just see the man as he swung in at a trot and dismounted before one of the ring posts. He must have seen Corsica's figure, silhouetted against the lighted glass doors, before he recognized who was with her.

"Corsica," Quintin Garland said. "I came to apologize for this afternoon—"

He stopped then, close enough so that she could see his face. It was turned toward Blacklaws, now. Corsica was suddenly swept with a sense of helplessness.

There was the faint clink of a French door opening, and the slouched figure of Corsica's older brother came through the portal. He peered down past the three of them, standing at the head of the steps.

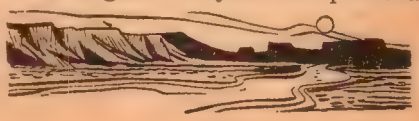
"Well, Quintin," he said in his ironic voice. "Staying to supper?"

Corsica could not help her sharp wheeling motion toward Dee Manatte, anger flattening the curve of her cheek. Had he done that deliberately?

But it was too late, now, for already her father was saying, "Yes, Quintin, light and sup. Kenny's here too. Did you see him? I'll send old Josh for your dad, and we'll have a regular banquet."

"Thank you, Mr. Manatte," Garland said. "I'd be glad to stay."

"Good, good." Troy Manatte pounded



his cane on the floor. "And afterwards we'll all take a ride. I've got a new stud I'd like to show you. I'll go get my ridin'-gear on right now."

The old man wheeled, almost upsetting himself, and hobbled through the open front door. A malicious relish of the scene was in Dee's dry voice.

"It's a pity such old friends have to stand out here. Why can't we all come inside?"

Blacklaws was the first to turn. Corsica watched Garland with a silent plea in her eyes, but he did not seem to be aware of that, his attention being so taken up with Blacklaws that he even forgot his manners and came up the steps to go through the door before Corsica. She followed them helplessly, a little surprised to see that Garland was as tall as Blacklaws. She had thought of Kenny as bigger, somehow. Perhaps it was that Garland did not have Blacklaws's massive upper frame. He was narrower through the shoulders and hips, yet it was a hard narrowness that robbed him of no strength. It merely seemed a strength differently directed than Blacklaws's, formed of nervous movement and eager vitality, like a hound straining at the leash.

Dee had already stepped back in through the French door and was pouring drinks from a cut-glass decanter on the butternut sideboard. He was a tall boy, in his middle twenties, something prematurely aged about his gaunt face. He had inherited the black hair of the Manattes, letting it go shaggy to mat up over his ears and down the back of his neck.

"A toast to Kenny's return," he chuckled.

"How nice of you to play the host, Dee," Corsica said thinly.

An eager light filled his eyes, like a puppy waiting for a game to start. He handed the drinks around, lifted his.

"To Kenny's return," he said.

Garland got his glass halfway to his compressed lips, then lowered it. Blacklaws let his back down without drinking.

"You don't welcome it," he said.

"Did you think I would?" asked Garland.

A faint strain seemed to fill Blacklaws's cheeks. Corsica knew a painful desire to turn the course of this.

"Kenny was in Wyoming," she said, startled at the brittleness of her voice.

"Quintin went away too, you know," Dee told Blacklaws. "Law school in Austin. Even got a job in the Attorney General's office. Why didn't you stay, Quintin?"

"Dee," Corsica said sharply. "You know why he came back."

"Yeah?" Dee grinned and shrugged at Blacklaws. "Have to admire his courage, anyway, Kenny. Putting up such a gallant fight for the little operators. Roman and Obermier have had six separate men up on one charge or another during the last three months. Garland's defended every one of them." He shook his head sadly. "I just can't believe they were *all* guilty."

"Dee!" Corsica's voice escaped her angrily.

Garland turned to face the fireplace, his back turned toward them. "Never mind, Corsica," he said tightly. "We all know your brother's quaint sense of humor."

There was an awkward pause. Blacklaws took a drink, then turned to sit down in the shabby lyre-arm sofa. At this moment the clatter of boots came from the hall outside. Dee wheeled,

walking to the door. He reached the opening just as Phil Manatte came into view in the hall. Phil was the younger brother, just twenty, as tall as Dee without the weight of a man's form filling out his chest and shoulders. There was a harried expression to his blue eyes as he tried to brush past Dee, hanging onto his right arm with his other hand. His batwing chaps and heavy hip-length mackinaw were covered with a whitish grime that crumbled off his boots to dribble across the hall floor with every step.

"Phil," asked Dee, catching at him. "What is it?"

"Leave me go," said the younger boy, tearing free and turning to climb the stairway. Anger pinched at Dee's face, and he followed the boy up. He caught him out of sight, near the top, and Corsica could hear their angry voices. She sent a helpless look at the two men remaining in the parlor.

"If you want to go, Corsica," said Blacklaws, "everything will be all right here, I promise you."

"Thanks, Kenny," she said, and rose to walk from the room to the stairs. Dee had Phil backed up against the rail near the top.

"You didn't go to Houston. That's shell-mud on your boots. Now tell me where you've been, Phil—"

"Dee," cried Corsica. "Let the boy alone."

Dee whirled on her, anger robbing his face of its sardonic humor. "I'm tired of all this mystery, Corsica."

"You're being terrible tonight," she said. "Baiting Blacklaws and Garland down there—and now this."

Dee slackened against the banister. "Well, now, little gal's older brother didn't make his sis mad with his innocent little pleasures, did he?"

"Innocent?" she asked. "You know how little it took to set Quintin and Kenny at each other when they were kids. You know what liquor does to Quintin. So you fill him up with that atrocious peach brandy and prod him about the trials till he's ready to fly apart anyway—" She broke off, realizing her voice was loud enough to carry downstairs. She lowered it to an intense tone. "You go downstairs and bring Dad from his room, Dee. Take him to the dining-room and get him seated. And I swear, if I find you back in that living-room before I come down, I'll—I'll—"

"You'll what, darlin'?"

"You force me to say it," she told him. "I'll cut off your allowance."

His cheeks seemed to draw in, filling his face with gaunt surprise. "You wouldn't dare."

"Just go on baiting those two, and find out," she said.

He continued to stare at her, lips parted faintly. Then, without a word, he cut around her and went downstairs at a hard walk. She faced about to Phil, who still stood against the banister.

"What happened, Phil?"

"Horse took a tumble. Just let me change clothes, will you? I'm splattering mud all over your house."

"Everything's all right?"

"If you mean the money, I got it."

She watched him turn and go to his room. The sound from downstairs brought her about, then. Garland was speaking, voice strained and tight.

"You must have known there weren't any more jobs to be had down here than there were up in Wyoming. Why did you come back?"

There was a treacherous silence, and Corsica hurried downstairs. She reach-

ed the living-room to find Garland standing with his back to the fireplace, the decanter in one hand, an empty glass in the other. His face was flushed, his eyes glittering brightly, and she realized he must have been drinking steadily. Blacklaws sat on the sofa, the weight of him depressing the pillows deeply. His eyes were half-lidded and withdrawn, watching Garland steadily.

Before she could speak, the tinkle of spur chains came from the hall behind her. Troy Manatte came from his bedroom with ancient batwing chaps flapping at skinny legs and a pair of Navy revolvers holstered at his waist, their weight throwing him off-balance at every step.

"Tell the boys I'm ready," he said, hardly looking at her as he went on by. He flung open the front door and stomped out, halting at the top step to stand there peering out into the night. Dee came down the hall from the rear, shrugging at Corsica.

"I couldn't do nothing with him. He was bent on riding tonight. That black stud's been dead ten years and he still thinks he's goin' to top it."

Now the old man had half turned, a puzzled frown on his face. He passed a hand across his forehead in a helpless gesture. Then he walked down to the end of the gallery. His chair complained raucously as he lowered himself into it.

"You still haven't told me why you came back," Garland told Blacklaws, pouring himself another drink.

Corsica turned impatiently into the room. "What does it matter? A man can have his own reasons for coming back to his home."

Garland's eyes flashed wickedly in the light. "The same reasons that made him go away?"

Blacklaws rose so swiftly from the couch that Corsica's breath stopped. But he only turned and moved around the lyre arms to the French windows, a solid shape against their checkering of small panes, looking out.

"Why *did* you go away, Kenny?" asked Dee. "There was a lot of talk about it. Right on the same day Martin was killed, with his head all bashed in that way."

"Yes," Garland said. "With his head all bashed in that way."

"Please," protested Corsica. "This can't help."

"Perhaps it can," Blacklaws murmured. "You mentioned talk, Dee. What kind of talk?"

Dee shrugged. "You know what goes around about something like that."

"Can't say that I do," Blacklaws told him.

"I'll tell you, then," Garland said. An unnatural flush filled his face. "They said you killed my father."

Corsica could see the muscles bunch up across Blacklaws's shoulders. Finally he came about to face Garland. The clenched muscles in his jaw made it look heavier.

"And what do you think?" he asked softly.

Garland was the lawyer now, relishing the pause he brought to this, with the attention of the whole room on him.

"I think Dad had taken you out into the bayou to thrash you," he said, then. "You turned on him, and you murdered him."

For just that instant, Corsica saw Blacklaws's reaction. It was like a wash of brackish water flooding against his face and ebbing away to leave it darkened and muddy. Then she could almost see him deliberately draining

himself of its violence. It seemed a painfully long time before he spoke.

"It helps a man to know exactly where he stands," he said, at last. "But I promised Corsica everything would be all right. You can't get anything out of me in this house."

Garland's response must have been brought on by the release of drink and his own wild frustration at being unable to goad Blacklaws. Corsica saw it swelling up in his eyes.

"Quintin—"

As if her voice had set it off, he flung glass and all at Blacklaws's face. It struck Blacklaws on the cheek, the amber liquor splashing across his whole face. The tumbler dropped unbroken to the floor. Blacklaws's eyes flew open an instant after they had closed. His whole body came forward onto the balls of his feet. She saw Garland spread his boots to meet it, a triumph in his parted lips.

Then Blacklaws was settling back, his eyes closing till they had the squinted look of a whipped man. Carefully he reached up to wipe the liquor off his face with the back of a hand. His voice trembled faintly when he finally spoke.

"I told you, you can't bring me to a fight in this house, Quintin."

Garland remained there a moment longer, face white and wild. Then he wheeled and walked viciously past Corsica. She saw the blank look to his eyes, and realized he did not even see her. The three of them stood in a static silence till the door slammed, and the porch trembled beneath Garland's feet.

"Evenin', Quintin," called Troy Manatte. "Give your dad my regards."

Corsica's eyes were on Blacklaws now. He was standing with both fists closed tight. She moved to him, catching his arm. She was shocked at the tension filling his body.

"I'm sorry, Kenny," she said.

His voice trembled. "Are you?"

She frowned at him, and then realized what must be in his mind. "You think I knew Garland was coming too?"

"Didn't you?"

"Kenny—" She broke off, backing away from him. "I refuse to dignify that with an answer," she said.

He turned to look at her. Finally he spoke, stiffly. "I think I'd better go too, Corsica."

She watched him till he was out the door. She was suddenly afraid that he would meet Quintin outside, and hurried to the French doors. But from here she saw that Quintin's copperbottom was gone from the ring posts. Blacklaws unhitched Tar Baby and swung aboard, turning the black mare out into the darkness. Dee chuckled softly from behind.

"Well, look at all the fireworks."

Tension left Corsica in a tide. She was abruptly too drained to feel anger at her brother. She went upstairs to her room and sat down on the tester bed in the dark. She wanted to cry, and couldn't, wanted to meet this with some adequate emotion, and couldn't. Finally she turned up the oil lamp and went to her closet. She moved out a wicker hamper to reach down behind and lift out the whip. She took this back to the bed and sat down and stared at it a long time.

It was an old blacksnake about ten feet long, a whip she had found hidden in her father's room two years ago. She had never been able to make him tell where he had gotten it. On the stock carved into the wood was the name.

Martin Garland.

Chapter Four

Hog Hunt

KENNY BLACKLAWS awoke to a foggy dawn in the old abandoned line shack by Smoky Canes. He rolled out of his worn blankets and groggily pulled on his clothes. Figments of the night before kept coming to him. He had half-expected Garland to be waiting in the grove around the Manatte house or along the river, but apparently the man's anger had left him no patience for that.

Thought of Garland's anger made Blacklaws think of his own. He felt a vague sickness as he recalled how it had gripped him last night. It was something he had feared all the way down from Laramie. It was something that had haunted him all those nine years he had been away. It was why he had practiced control so arduously.

Roman hadn't been able to make him mad. That showed something. Even Charlie Carew and that dirty swindle the man had pulled to get him back hadn't really made him mad. That showed he had gained some control through those years. But not enough. That was the insidious fear that had lain beneath his long struggle. Enough for Roman or Charlie Carew or other men. But not enough for Quintin Garland. Why should that be? Were its roots in the deep antipathy that had lain between Quintin and Blacklaws from the first. Or did it go farther than that? Was it because Quintin was Martin Garland's son, and so inextricably involved with all that had happened?

It was taking Blacklaws back now. Nine years back. Down in the black mud of Bayou Lafitte, where a shaggy-headed boy stood spread-legged on that little patch of solid ground, shaken by a rage and reaction he could no longer control.

You won't touch me with that whip again, Martin, I swear it, I didn't run that horse through your cotton today, and you're not going to whip me for it—

Blacklaws closed his eyes, trying to blot out the memory. But he could not lose the ugly picture of it, the one time when he had lost himself completely to emotion and had ruined his whole life by it.

Blacklaws rose from the bunk, trying to shake it from his mind. He made a fire in the stove, then got a can of hog lard and fingered into his frying pan what little remained. Putting this over the flames to melt, he unwrapped the rest of the catfish he had caught the day before, rolled the strips of white meat in corn meal, and dropped them into the pan. He forced his mind to consider the other things that had happened last night, piecing them together, adding one thing onto the next like a man piling bricks into a wall.

Phil was supposed to have been in Houston? That white grime on his pants didn't come from the Houston road, Blacklaws thought. *Only place you get marked like that is down around the shell islands. What would he be doing there? Rustling? Why? Phil was always the most decent of those two boys. Not the type to turn bad just because of a little hard times. He'd need a bigger reason than that. I wonder if the Manatte stocks are really paying off. This drop in the beef market has begun to hit the North too. Say the stocks weren't paying. That would be a big enough reason. Not for his own selfish interests. For Corsica, and the*

family. That sounds more like Phil.

And that brought him to Corsica. Had she looked like she was trying to hide something when Phil came in? No. More surprised and puzzled. But maybe she was a good actress. He had to look at all the possibilities. He shook his head vaguely, continually presented with the image of the woman herself rather than her motives. How poignantly the beauty of her had struck him. There had been other women in these last nine years, but none of them struck at his most jealously guarded sources, the way the mere presence of Corsica could. Perhaps part of this was the fact that she knew him so well. But the other part was her beauty, her ripened, yearning womanhood that seemed to melt all a man's defenses.

The nervous shiftings of his horse in the corral broke in on Blacklaws's thoughts. He listened a moment, then his caution took hold. He slid the frying fish off the fire and got his Remington from its holster, where it hung by the cartridge belt to a wall-peg. He scooped up the empty water bucket and put his gun in this. Then he opened the door, surveying the park before he stepped out. It was still empty. He walked unhurriedly out and down the wall to the corner of the house. Once around on the blind side, he flattened up against the wall and pulled his gun from the bucket.

The movements of Tar Baby now became more marked, as she snorted and pawed and ran up and down a fence of the pole corral. Finally she threw up her ugly hammerhead and gave a shrill whinney. There was an answering neigh from the open, over toward the pine grove. Then the drawling voice.

"Now, Myrtle, you don't want to make so much noise. You know how smart that Blacklaws yak is. He might have stepped around the corner of that shack real innocent-like, making everybody think he was only going after water, when really he had his cutter dumped in that bucket and is just waiting there now to shoot the beans out of you."

Blacklaws felt the tension slip from him. His smile broadened the lower part of his face, lending it youth, as he stepped around the corner of the shack to see the rider.

"Man flogs his life out beating the brush for scalawags," Blacklaws said, "and then one rides right up to his house."

Mock Fannin drew rein on his little bay pony, slickened by the dampness of the fog till its hide looked red as wet blood. Cousin of the Manattes, son of an Irish cattle agent who had married Troy Manatte's sister, Mock himself was probably the most disreputable man in a land of disreputable men, without giving any actual cause for such a reputation other than a congenital distaste for work, washing, and the truth.

He was a short and burly man, with a sloppy belly that rolled out in grimy folds over the beltless waistband of filthy rawhide leggins which were mottled clownishly with vari-colored patches of hide and linsey-woolsey. He was not much past thirty, but jowls had already formed about his mouth, and the deep creases made by these meaty bulges gave his face a leathery look above his scrubby growth of black beard.

"Dropped over Manatte way last night just after you left," he grinned. "Corsica told me you lit a shuck so fast they didn't get a chance to invite

you to the hog hunt today." He paused, the grin fading. "You tangled with a poison pup there, Kenny."

"Garland?" Blacklaws shrugged. "Nothing much I can do about it, Mock."

"You can keep right on being as watchful as you was this morning," Mock said.

Blacklaws looked up to see the grin again, sly and knowing, creasing Mock's unshaven face. He could not help answering it, and in a moment both of them were chuckling deeply with the easy comradeship they had known so many years before.

"I'll get my gear," Blacklaws said. "Where are they gathering?"

"Gumbo Meadows," Mock told him. "Rouquette's place."

Blacklaws saddled up and led Tar Baby from the corral and got a couple of bullhide buckets for the lard, tying them back of the cantle. Then he swung aboard and lined out southward with Mock at his hip. They passed casual conversation for a while, and then Mock asked:

"What are you doing with the hides, Kenny?"

It took Blacklaws a little by surprise. "King Wallace goes to Galveston every now and then. Hauls a wagonload for me for a quarter of the sale."

"Wouldn't you rather have the full amount?"

"Haven't got a wagon myself."

Mock sent him a sidelong glance. "I'm insulted you'd play dumb with me."

Blacklaws felt tension curling up within him. "I suppose you've got a hide factory hidden out in the grove."

"What if I had, Kenny, would you work with me?"

Blacklaws could not help turning to the man now, and frowning. "You?"

"Why not?" chuckled Mock. "I've got a set-up down south of Bayou Lafitte that'll strip a thousand hides a day and render a hundred tons of lard. I got markets in Galveston, Tampa, New Orleans, almost any place you want to mention."

Blacklaws free-bitted his mare through flags ringing a pothole. There was a tingling excitement in him. He couldn't believe this.

"You can't do all that alone," he said.

"John Roman's with me," Mock said casually.

This time Blacklaws could not hide his surprise. "Roman?"

Mock's giggle was sly. "You wouldn't of thought it, would you? What better set-up could we have? Nobody'd suspect a big operator like him. If anybody'd figure it out, you would. And you didn't. That proves it's good. The way Roman runs around the country kicking every little operator he can find and screaming how much of his beef they're rustling."

"And who else?" asked Blacklaws carefully.

Mock turned to squint at him. "Seems to me you're mighty curious."

"You already told me enough to hang you."

Mock's chuckle shook his sloppy belly. "All right. Just shows how much I trust you."

"Phil Manatte?"

Mock shrugged. "He works for me off and on. Too young to trust much."

"And maybe Quintin's in on the deal?"

Mock looked sharply at him, then pursed his lips and shook his head. "Too unreliable. We don't need any legal advice anyway. We're doing right pretty without it."

"How pretty?"

"Hundred thousand dollars a year."

Blacklaws grinned. "You old scalawag," he said. Then he threw back his head and let out the first hearty laugh he had given in months. "You damn old scalawag," he shouted. "You almost got the drop on me. I've been away so long I forgot what a real liar sounded like. John Roman and Phil Manatte and a thousand hides a day! If you hadn't thrown in that hundred thousand dollars a year you'd have had me."

Mock looked at him with a hurt expression. "You don't believe me?"

"Sure I believe you," said Blacklaws, still laughing. "Let's go out and skin a few thousand steers this morning."

Mock sighed. "Nobody ever believes me. Here I offer you the best thing you'll get in a lifetime, and you think I'm prevaricating."

They rode on, and Blacklaws felt good, really good, for the first time since his return. Then that faded, and he knew it was the let-down. He could not help feeling it. For a moment, there, he had thought this was it. He should have known it would never come that easy—an old friend walking up and handing him the whole thing on a silver platter.

"What made you think Garland was working for me?" Mock asked him.

"I saw Tate out in the canes day before yesterday," Blacklaws told him. "He asked me how I thought it could be fixed so hides could be rustled and Roman and Obermier wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Somehow, I couldn't see such an idea originating with Tate. It sounded more like a legal twist."

Mock emitted a disgusted snort. "Tate's already passed that word along. Sure it wasn't his idea. It comes from Garland. He has something on Roman, I guess. Thinks it might be worth a lot to the rustlers."

"I knew Garland had bad streaks in him. I never really thought he'd get on the wrong side of the trail."

"Why do you suppose he came back?" said Mock. "Not because he thought the little man needed him back here. Didn't you hear about the attorney general being kicked out for taking a bribe?"

"The attor—" Blacklaws looked at him impatiently. "You mean Garland took a bribe down in Austin?"

"No. The Attorney General."

"Is he disbarred?"

"The Attorney General?"

"No. Garland. Come out of the woods, Mock. If Garland was caught taking a bribe he'd be disbarred."

"Maybe they didn't have enough proof for that. Maybe it just put such a stain on his name that he couldn't make out in any of the bigger cities and had to come back here. Maybe I'm the only one around here who knows about it. I was in Austin at the time. It was a hushed-up affair."

"And now he's up against the wall even here," mused Blacklaws. "Roman and the others have ruined it for him. This rustling is just about the last chance he'll have."

"He'd give his soul to sit the top saddle in this county."

"Do you think he means to expose the rustlers if they fall for his offer and make contact?"

Mock shook his head. "More like him to demand a cut. There's big money in it, Kenny. Hundred thousand dollars a year."

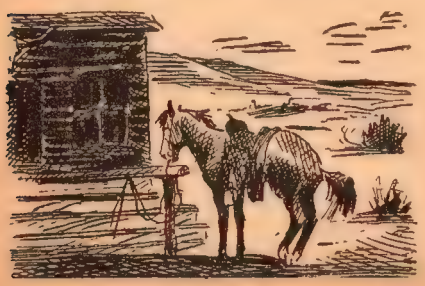
Blacklaws rode on without answering. He found himself putting this fact against all the others, shifting them back and forth against each other till

he found the right fit. Then he checked himself. Mock knew him too well. It would be a mistake to let the man see how much this meant to him.

They turned through a string of cypress swamps on a spongy trail and finally reached Gumbo Meadows, a stretch of salt-grass prairies strung out through the chinquapins and loblolly pines a few miles west of the Sabine. At the edge of one of these meadows, Rouquette had his shack, a squalid log structure set up on brick piers to escape the annual floods of this low country. There was already a crowd of horses and men and dogs about the cabin when Blacklaws and Mock came into the meadow.

Blacklaws saw both Phil and Dee Manatte squatted down with their backs against the piers, talking with Rouquette. He was an immense man, well over six feet, the muscles laced across his body like bulging snakes. His mixture of Choctaw Indian and Santo Domingan Negro was called *Os Rouge* in Louisiana. It gave him a skin that glistened like oiled mahogany in the sun.

Over by the steps was the cotton farmer, King Wallace, and his son, Gabe. They both were whittling at soft cedar sticks while they talked with Hush Collins, a bow-legged little brush-



hopper in his sixties, who ran a small cut of cows over in the westerly fringes of the Big Thicket. At sight of Blacklaws, Dee Manatte unfolded onto his feet, that loose grin lifting his lips.

"Well, if it ain't the catamount of Copper Bluffs, still alive and kicking. I thought Garland was all set to jump you in the brush last night."

Blacklaws shrugged. "Didn't show his light."

"You should have jumped down his craw at the house," Dee told him.

"Disappointed?" Blacklaws asked.

Dee shifted indolently away from the wall, still smiling. "You ain't afraid of Garland, are you, Kenny?"

"You always got to prod your way through a thicket?" asked Phil Manatte irritably. "Can't you just sit back and relax sometimes?"

"Talk about thickets," Mock told Phil, "I hear you was down my way last night. Why didn't you drop by?"

A startled look caught at Phil's youthful face; he blanketed that off deliberately. "I wasn't down your way, Mock," he said. "What gave you that idea?"

"Well now, I don't know," said Mock, "except there was about four hundred skinned carcasses stinking up the bayou in front of my place when I woke up this morning. I knew nobody except you could do all that in one night, without help."

A nervous laugh shook Phil's body. "Damn you," he said. "Sure it wasn't four thousand?"

Rouquette's bone-white teeth flashed in a wide grin. "Sure, sure," he said. "Four thousand. And they all had wing and fin on them. How about we step on our hay-burners and hunt up these hog, before Mock here have us believe they turned into carpetbagger and goin' to

take over Jefferson County."

He turned to go around behind the shack after his corralled horse, but Blacklaws did not miss the momentary settling of his glance on Phil Manatte. The *Os Rouge* came back in a few minutes in the saddle and the rest of them took to their animals, a half dozen hound dogs lifting themselves out of shady spots, gathering in an eager bunch before the riders.

The cavalcade soon left the open prairies and plunged into the twilit paths of the bayous, passing under gnarled cypresses with mustang vines looping down off their branches, big around as a man's arm. Here and there a post oak flung the long shadows of its waxy green leaves in a casual dappling across a sunny patch.

Mock and Blacklaws had ridden southwest from the line cabin to reach Gumbo Meadows, and now they were continuing their direction, until the upper margins of Congo Bog came into view. This was a vast, little-known swampland bordered on the west by the Neches and the east by the Sabine, running south for ten miles to Lake Sabine and the coast. It had gotten its name in the early part of the century when a band of fleeing slaves had sought refuge in its fastness, and had never been heard of again. Blacklaws himself had penetrated its fringes once or twice, hunting with Phil, but they had not gone in far. He knew of no white man who had gone very deep and returned to tell of it, though he had always suspected Mock of knowing more about its interior than anyone else.

"Now I hear from Deller you've moved away from Mexican Creek and set up shop in the Bog," Blacklaws told him.

"Too crowded on Mexican Creek," Mock told him. "Anybody gets in a day's ride of me I feel cramped."

"How deep in the Bog are you?"

"Seventeen miles."

"Find any of those big cottonmouths?"

"Every morning on my doorstep. Seventeen feet long. I have plenty of dead bodies to feed them and they leave me alone."

The land broke up into fingers of water lying green and stagnant between stretches of wind-tossed reed beds and clumps of clashing cane. The first hog broke out of his hiding in the reeds almost underfoot, charging off through a shallow lagoon with a great splashing and roaring. More of them burst from the reed beds to run before the men, but the riders ignored this until they had reached the largest patch of reeds and canes in the marsh. Here they halted, dumping their lard pails and rendering equipment at the base of a cypress.

"I been scout these lagoons all this winter," Rouquette told them. "They's enough piney-rooters fatten up on the acorn in there to feed all of Jefferson County. Ken, you and the Manatte stay here with the great liar. The rest of us we ride on around the other side. Give us chance to reach our place, then light up."

Mock watched the *Os Rouge* and Hush and the Wallaces ride out across a lagoon, splashing knee deep through the water, and then turned to the remaining men. "Who's got a match?"

Phil produced some and got off his horse, picking his way carefully through the reeds, feeling with each step for sure ground till he reached the main bed. Here he hunted a long time for dry fuel for kindling, piling

it up in a couple of spots. Then he ignited this. The rain-dampened reeds responded sullenly, sending up a black smoke. Red flames began to flicker through the smoke. Here and there a tongue of outlying grass ignited, and formed a crackling little line of fire.

Then the flags within the reed bed began to flame. A chorus of grunts and snorts arose, and the first wild hog erupted heavily from the reeds with a crash, squealing as a tongue of fire singed its neck. It was a long-snouted young shoat.

"There goes taller," shouted Mock. "First one's mine."

He wheeled toward the shoat, firing. The pig stumbled, dug its snout in the mud, and with a wild squeal, tried to spin away. Mock ran his red pony after it, slopping fetlock-deep into the rotten mud, firing the second time.

Blacklaws lost it then as half a dozen more burst from the burning reeds and scattered toward them. He picked a fat sow and fired three times before she went down.

"They're coming now," Dee yelled across to Rouquette. "Watch for them old granddaddies. They're the worst."

The muffled explosion of shots rose from the opposite side of the reed bed. Blacklaws's sow was down, sinking heavily into the mud. He wheeled Tar Baby away from the sidelong lunge of a young boar as it tried to hook him with one of its gleaming tusks as it ran by. He spun in the saddle, throwing down to shoot as it ran away from him on his other side. But at the same moment, Dee came into his vision, already firing. The hog jerked in midstride and went rolling over and over, feet kicking.

Phil was racing over to the south tip of the reed bed, yelling that a whole herd of them was coming out of the thickets there. Dee whirled his animal on a hind heel to follow his younger brother. At the same time, Mock shouted from behind Blacklaws.

"Turn it around, Kenny, here comes the first old grandpa."

A keen apprehension ran through Blacklaws, causing him to put his off rein hard against Tar Baby's neck, spinning the mare back toward the reed bed. The old boars coming out, singed and maddened, were bigger than the sows and the shoats, mottled hides scarred by the brush and by many battles, their tusks gleaming wickedly as they ran snorting into the open. One was breaking to run between Mock and Blacklaws. Tar Baby veered to cut across the boar's line of direction without any signals from her rider.

Blacklaws opened fire at the hog. It took the rest of his bullets to stop it. Even then he had to spin away in the last instant, as the boar lunged past, going down. Another pair of boars had burst from the reeds, and Mock turned his grunting bay to tail them. He split them up and one turned toward the post oaks north of the reed bed. Yelling wildly, Mock plunged after this boar, opening fire. The hog disappeared into the dark shadows beneath the trees.

"Don't go in there after him, Mock," yelled Blacklaws. "He'll get your horse where it can't run."

But Mock's excitement blocked off all caution. The second boar had cut around behind Mock's horse, but Blacklaws's oncoming mare caused it to turn again, in the same direction that Mock was running. Blacklaws hauled up, hoping the hog would not follow Mock once the pressure was off. The squeal-

ing boar did not see this, and plunged into the trees right behind Mock.

Blacklaws put the spurs to Tar Baby. He went into the trees at a dead run, mud slopping up head-high from his animal's churning hoofs. Then they hit grassed-over ground that made a squeaking sound beneath the running animal. The brush thickened, with palmettos rearing up in a waist-high mass of tossing fronds to whip at Tar Baby. Waxen leaves splattered across Blacklaws's face, blinding him. He heard the smash of heavy brush beneath him, felt it claw at his leggins, opened stinging eyes just in time to duck beneath a low-swinging grape vine. Then he heard a stertorous grunting ahead, accompanied by the clatter of broken brush, and erupted into an open glade.

Mock was racing at the thick wall of canes and brush at the other side of this glade. Apparently the hog he was chasing had already plunged into the thicket, and finding it impenetrable farther in, had whirled to come back. For just as Mock's horse reached the fringe of brush, the spotted boar came charging out. Mock fired point blank, going right on in over the hog.

It jerked with the impact of the bullet, but plunged in between the bay's legs before going down, tossing its head up in a last spasm to gore the horse. The tusk ripped the bay's belly front to rear as it ran on over the hog. The horse leaped into the air with a wild scream, pitching Mock off, and then went down kicking into the tangle of brush, blood spouting over Mock as he hit. He rolled to his hands and knees, mottled with blood and mucky earth, crouching there in a daze.

The hog was down too, in the middle of the glade, grunting its life out with Mock's bullet in its body. The boar ahead of Blacklaws immediately turned toward its companion, wheeling with its rump in toward the fallen animal, head jerking up and down in ugly little movements. Blacklaws turned his horse toward Mock, throwing down on the remaining hog. There was a metallic click, and he remembered he had fired his last shot.

He had reached Mock by then, and he reined his mare in, trying to reload. But Tar Baby was so spooked by the smell of blood and the fear of that grunting boar that she fought his reins, fiddling and rearing.

"Climb aboard before that rooter charges," Blacklaws shouted at Mock. "I can't let go this horse to reload."

Mock pawed hazily at the mare to help him rise, sending her to kicking wildly. Blacklaws was almost pitched off before he fought the animal down and swung her around so that Mock's pawing hands caught a stirrup leather instead of a hind leg. Then Blacklaws held the fretting beast there while Mock climbed erect, pulling heavily on the leather.

"Get on!" said Blacklaws.

"That tumble clabbered my brains," Mock told him, reeling heavily into the bronc as he tried to climb aboard. "Where in hell are you, Ken—"

He broke off, and Blacklaws felt his weight sag into the horse. There was a rustling, grunting sound, and another hog came nosing out of the brush from the direction of the reed bed. This was an immense blue sow, bigger than any they had seen so far, its sharp back as tall as Mock's waist. When it saw the two men, a bestial sound shook its shaggy chest.

"Where is he, Kenny?" gasped Mock. "My head's spinnin' so I can't see a thing."

"It's a she, right in front of you," Blacklaws said, fighting the rearing horse. "For God's sake, will you get that cotton out of your head and climb on!"

"I'm afraid to turn around, Kenny. Long as she thinks I'm looking at her, she won't charge. She'll rush me the minute I turn my back. I know these piney-rooters—"

"Then hand me your gun," Blacklaws told him. "Mine's empty and I can't reload and hold this horse at the same time."

"Lost my cutter in that fall, Kenny."

"Get my gun out of its holster then, and reload it."

He felt Mock's hand pawing blindly for his holster, as the man hunted for the weapon without taking his face away from the giant sow. There was a tug, and the Remington was free. The mare squealed, fighting the bit. Blacklaws had to use both hands to hold the horse. They were directly between the two fiddling hogs. The boar guarding the dying razorback began tossing its head and throwing its chest back and forth. This sent the blue sow on the other side to grunting and coughing. Smaller tugs came, as Mock found his belt and thumbed fresh shells free.

"I can't hold this bronc much longer, Mock. Can you see yet?"

"It's all fuzzy. That the sow over by the bindweed?"

"No," Blacklaws said. "You're way off. She's over in front of that palmetto. You'd better hand that gun up here when you got it reloaded."

The sow was fretting around and gouging at the matted grass with its tusks and Blacklaws knew it wanted to get over and help the boar protect their dying companion.

"Mock—" Blacklaws began. The sudden sound of his voice set the horse off again, and she tried to wheel away from Mock. Blacklaws put the reins hard against her neck to pull her back. The pull must have brought the bit too far up against the roof of the mare's mouth. With a wild scream of pain, she reared up. Throwing himself forward to stay on and beating at her neck to knock the animal down again, Blacklaws heard the sow's coughing roar, and saw it rush Mock.

"Kenny," yelled Mock. "Where is she?"

"The gun," shouted Blacklaws, as the horse came down again. "The gun!"

Mock threw himself back against the mare's rump, his arm thrown high above his head, holding the gun. This put it within Blacklaws's reach, and he forgot the horse in that moment to grab at the weapon. He seized it, as the horse started kicking savagely at Mock and spinning away. Fighting the frenzied mare with one hand, he had to twist far around in the saddle to fire at the sow. He did not know how many bullets Mock had gotten into the gun. He only knew he shifted crazily from one position to the other on that plunging horse, in order to keep firing at the sow's head, until the gun was empty.

One of the bullets must have hit its brain, for it suddenly went down and flipped over into Mock, knocking him to his hands and knees. At the same time, the other hog charged.

"Watch it, Mock," shouted Blacklaws, trying to fight the frantic mare around in that direction.

Mock wheeled toward the grunts of the charging boar, striving to rise. But one of his feet was still caught under the heavy sow, and it tripped him back to his knee again. Blacklaws had gotten

Tar Baby pointed toward Mock by now, and he dug spurs into the horse. The mare screamed and plunged directly between the charging boar and Mock.

Blacklaws dropped the gun and leaned out of the saddle as he came above Mock. He caught him by the belt and swung him up off the ground. The weight of the man almost jerked him off. He pinched his legs, clinging desperately for another instant. He had a vague sense of the boar plunging past the rump of his horse.

Then he let go the reins to grab at the saddle horn with his free hand. He felt himself going over, but still clung to Mock's belt, trying to squeeze a few more feet out of the ride. Then the combined weight of them sliding off on that side pulled the saddle itself under the horse.

Blacklaws released Mock, and kicked free himself. They both hit the ground and rolled off into the brush with a great crash of bindweed and agrita. The bole of a cypress stopped Blacklaws. Everything seemed to spin about him with a roaring sound, and he hardly knew how he gained his hands and knees. He crouched there, shaking his head, until he could see through the flags and palmettos into the clearing. The boar had wheeled from its charge, staring around in bewilderment.

When it could not see them, it shook its head in savage little jerks and went to grunting and squealing and pawing the earth. Mock crept up beside Blacklaws, dabbing at his bleeding face. Both of them were afraid to move, to speak, for fear of bringing the beast down on them again. Finally, Blacklaws's bronc made a renewed crashing, romping through the thickets farther off. The boar wheeled that way, lifting its head to sniff, and then went trotting away, disappearing in the brush on the other side.

"Boy, howdy," whispered Mock. "I ain't been that close to things since I rode alligators with Jim Bowie. Do you know who that blue sow belongs to, Kenny?"

"I can see an earmark, I don't know whose it is."

"That's Teacup," whispered Mock. "That's Tate's pet hog—"

Something stopped him. Blacklaws saw that his eyes had shifted to a farther point in the clearing. Finally Blacklaws made out a man standing hip-deep in palmettos and bindweed, regarding the dead sow. It was Tate.

"Kenny," Mock said in a strained voice, "I hope to hell he didn't see you kill that sow."

Chapter Five

A Game of Poker

IT WAS raining again in Copper Bluffs. Rain dribbled off the viga poles of the adobe buildings and made glimmering channels down the ancient walls. Rain filled the wheel ruts lacing the streets and turned them to coppery rivers. Rain drummed soddenly into the splintered sidewalk fronting the newer buildings and lifted up the pungent reek of dampened pine.

Quintin Garland shook this sidewalk as he ducked from the meager protection of one wooden overhang to the next on his way to the stables. He had stayed late in his office, hoping the storm would abate, but was finally forced out when he saw it did not mean

to stop. In front of the Clover Saloon he slowed down, with sight of a man down on his hands and knees, looking for something under the high sidewalk.

"Mock," Garland said. "What's the matter?"

Mock's voice came indistinctly from underneath the planks. "I'm lookin' for Myrtle."

"Myrtle?"

"She got away from me. We were drinking in the Clover and I must have said something that hurt her feelings. She hit me over the head with a pint of whisky and ran out here."

"You're talking about your horse."

"That's right. Come 'ere, Myrtle. I didn't mean what I said." There was a scuffling sound under the planks, and a jerk of Mock's broad rear. "Where are you, Myrtle? Come on out and I'll buy you another drink."

Garland reached down to grab the man by the seat of his pants and pulled him out. "You're drunk, Mock. You'll have pneumonia if you keep this up."

Mock bumped his head sliding back with Garland's angry pull. A silly grin filled his face. Water dribbled down the greasy creases of his jowls.

"Sure I'm drunk," he laughed. "I'm never sober. Tried to get Kenny to come in and drink with me, but he wouldn't."

"Kenny—" Garland checked himself, frowning at the man. "You celebrating the hog hunt?" he asked. "It must have been a good one."

"We killed seventy thousand hogs," chuckled Mock.

"Seventy thou—" Garland smiled without much humor. "Sure. Seventy thousand. That's not many."

"It is when you count Teacup."

Garland leaned toward the man. "What?"

"Teacup, Teacup," Mock answered, his voice gaining volume. He threw up his arm dramatically. "I saddled her up and rode to Galveston. That's why Myrtle is so mad. She said it didn't befit my dignity to ride a hog. I will admit my feet dragged."

Garland stepped down into the mud, grabbing at Mock's shirt front and pulling him partway up. "Listen, you drunken liar, that isn't what happened. Tell me the truth. What about Teacup? Was Tate there?"

Mock swept Garland's hands off, and with inebriate dignity, tried to rise. He had to turn around and hug one of the supports of the overhang.

"Drunk, am I?" he said. "It's you that's drunk. You can't see the great truth in life."

Garland frowned intensely at the man. "Did somebody kill Teacup?" he asked.

"Even Pontius Pilate didn't know what truth was," said Mock.

"Did Kenny Blacklaws kill Teacup?"

Garland saw Mock's head lift slightly. His eyes were glazed as he stared at the post.

"Kenny Blacklaws?" Mock asked. Then, with startling violence, he whirled away, facing out toward the street. "If you see Myrtle, tell her I've gone home," he said, and took one immense stride and fell onto his face. Garland stood watching him a long moment, but Mock made no effort to rise.

Garland himself then turned to the sidewalk and walked to the stables, his whole mind taken up with the possibilities of this. He got his horse and headed out of town, heedless of the rain now. He followed the Houston Road till it turned northward to skirt this eastern fringe of the Big Thicket. A quarter mile up this he broke from

the road on a meager trail that took him directly into the Thicket itself.

Unlike the boggy country making up the bulk of Jefferson County, the Thicket was a dry area, a veritable jungle of brushland that stretched north for a hundred miles. Most of it was completely unknown, except to the outlaws and fugitives who had sought its fastness as refuge. Garland himself had never been farther in than the few miles it took to reach Tate's place. With night blackening about him, he followed the narrow Indian trail through knee-deep masses of tossing palm fronds. He plunged into a grove of beeches and maples so dense and lightless he could not see his horse's ears. Finally he reached the wattle hut on the banks of a sluggish stream.

He did not even have to call. The coughing sounds began, as the hogs sensed his horse. He could hear the beasts breaking from rain-drenched thickets about the hut, though he could not see them. There was a grunting chorus from within the hovel, and the door burst open.

Tate was holding a pine-knot torch, its eerie light flooding him and his hogs like ruddy paint. A half dozen of them banked up behind his legs, and a shoat tried to squeeze between his knees. The wind kept blowing fitful gusts of rain across the torch, and it spat and hissed, almost going out. He stepped farther back inside, holding the light directly above his head so that it cast his primitive face into macabre pockets of shadow.

"I was in town," Garland said. "Mock told me somebody killed Teacup."

Tate made some inarticulate sound deep in his chest. His eyes had a wild gleam in the flickering light.

"Blacklaws?" asked Garland.

"He oughtta be hung!" Tate threw his head back and his voice left him in a shrill squeal. "He oughtta be strung up and swing like a loose gallus every time the wind blows. He knew Teacup was mine. He saw the earmarks on her. They always know, they go right ahead and kill 'em anyway, don't care if it's old Tate's, go ahead and murder, listen to 'em running away in the thickets, listen to 'em squealing, my little pigs, my Teacup—"

He stopped for lack of breath, chest heaving. The childish fit had left his face hideous. Garland leaned toward the man, speaking softly.

"You didn't have a price the other day, Tate."

The abandoned rage took a long time to leave Tate's face. Finally he rolled his head back till his eyes were on Garland, small and sly now with his own secret knowledge.

"And now," he said, "you think I do have a price."

"You have a reason. It was *your* hog he killed."

"Always the lawyer-man, ain't you? Always twisting it around so's it's old Tate, and not you. Always putting things in my mouth. You want him dead as much as I do but you won't admit it." He paused again, but Garland did not speak. Tate licked his lips. "All right. So I have a price. It's a latch."

"A latch?"

"A latch, a latch for a door, with a bolt, a strong bolt that'll take pounding, a nice shiny latch—" Tate chuckled —"but it won't stay shiny long in this country, will it? It'll rust up in a day, look like any other old latch, nobody'll know the difference, not even somebody who always figures things out ahead."

Garland studied the man. "I'll have

to get it at Copper Bluffs."

"You're thinking that will mix you up in whatever I do with it," murmured Tate. He spat. "You're right. But that's my price."

"I'll get it for you," Garland said. "Tonight."

The Garland house lay halfway between the Big Thicket and Copper Bluffs, some five miles west of town at the head of Bayou Lafitte. Martin Garland had built it here before the war, first trying to found a cotton empire, and to be wiped out by the war, and then trying to become rich in cattle, and to be blocked off from this by death.

Under Quintin's neglect, the unpeeled cedar logs were rotting away and sagging at their dovetailed corners, the ashlar stonework of the chimney was slowly sinking into the land, and the saddle roof was patched with tin or buckskin wherever the hand-split shingles had been beaten off by the winds. Usually this squalor brought a bitter depression to Garland, but tonight he was unaware of it as he rode his Copperbottom around to the pole corral and let it in with the other gaunt mare, stripping the saddle off. He had gone back to Copper Bluffs to get Tate's latch. Though the store had been closed, Deller lived in the back of the building, and could be persuaded to get what a man wanted. Garland had then taken the latch back to Tate, and had finally come home.

Dripping water, he walked in through the rear of the covered breezeway that divided the two sections of the house, and dropped his sodden saddle beside another kack and a pair of frayed saddle blankets and a rusty plow and a heap of other gear. He turned to the door on the right, and reached for the latch. The portal swung open before he realized it was not latched. He stood there, with the sense of another presence in the darkened room.

"Who is it?" he asked sharply.

"Me, Quintin," answered Phil Manatte, in a weak voice.

Garland stepped in, rustling for matches on the shelf, turning to light the hurricane lantern on the bare plank table. Its illumination spread out across a sagging puncheon floor, a pair of rawhide-seated chairs, a tumbled bed in one corner. Upon this sat Phil.

There was a smear of black mud on his jaw, and his clothes were blotched with it. He had his shirt opened, and was holding a piece of filthy cloth wadded up inside, against his chest. Then Garland realized that some of the black spots on his shirt were not mud. He walked to the boy, grasping his shoulder.

"Why did you come here like this?"

"You've got to help me," the boy said. "My horse played out south of here and I just couldn't make it home."

Garland's face sharpened. He wheeled and walked to the door, shutting it and latching it.

"Now what is it?" he asked. "If you want me to help you, you've got to tell me. Did someone catch you peeling the wrong hide?"

Phil's whole body settled resignedly into the bed. "Yes," he said. "I guess they did."

"You weren't on your own, were you?"

The boy lifted his face in an effort of defiance. "Yes. I was. I was on my own."

"No you weren't!" Garland caught his shoulder again, bringing a spasm

of pain to Phil's face. "You're working for somebody. The odds are building up against a man operating alone unless he knows a place he can get rid of his hides quick. And the only place is that packery everybody's been looking for—isn't it?"

Phil shook his head dully. "I can't tell you, Quintin."

Garland pinched tighter. "Who are you working for, Phil?"

The boy's eyes squinted shut. "Please don't, Quintin, I can't tell you anything, I can't—"

Garland released him, wheeling away to walk to the table and stand there. He could see Phil was near the breaking point. Unconsciously, he began to assume his courtroom manner.

"You can't stay here," Garland said abruptly.

He heard Phil catch his breath, then speak with heavy effort. "I don't think they're actually on my tail. I threw them off a couple of miles south. But they're in the district."

"Then you can't stay here. There's no place to hide you, Phil." Again that pause. "Where will you go? Home?"

"I couldn't make it, Quintin."

"Then where?"

"Quintin, why won't you help me?"

"I'm trying to, Phil. But I've got to know what the risks are. You must realize the position you put me in."

"I do realize." Phil's voice was barely audible. "I'm sorry."

Garland turned to him, putting compassion into his words. "Never mind, Phil. What's a friend for if it isn't to help in a time like this?"

"It wouldn't get you in trouble to help me get home," Phil mumbled. "Just let me stay here tonight and then maybe help me home?"

"Don't you think they'll look there too? If they suspect you at all, don't you think that's the first place they'll look? Do you want to drag your sister into this?"

Phil stared in wide-eyed protest at Garland for an instant. Then he dropped his head again.

"No," he said, pushing his hand sickly against the wound. "No, I couldn't do that. I couldn't drag Corsica into it."

Garland let the silence run on, seeing it press the boy deeper against the bed. "To be here longer than overnight would be dangerous, Phil," he said, at last. "You'll need someone to watch you. And if I didn't show up in town, it would arouse their suspicions. And if you can't stay here, and you can't go home, where can you go?"

It came out of Phil in a half-sob. "I don't know, Quintin, I don't know."

"I want to help you, Phil. I'll be willing to take you anywhere you say. Anywhere, Phil."

Defeat put a putty color into Phil's face, and his whole body seemed to shrink. "All right," he said finally. "I'll tell you where to take me."

Triumph sharpened the angles of Garland's narrow face. His tall body inclined forward, waiting for Phil to go on. The boy finally looked up.

"I can't tell you all the directions now. It's too complicated. We can't start till tomorrow anyway."

A ridge of whitened flesh jumped up about Garland's compressed lips. He turned away to hide his anger from the boy.

At this moment, one of Garland's horses whinnied from out back. He wheeled and went to the bed, sweeping some old rag rugs from beneath here to throw them over the muddy footprints on the floor. After this he got a fire going in the pot-bellied woodstove,

working with a swift, nervous efficiency, and dragged a chair over for Phil, helping him into this.

"Sit as close as you can. Dry that mud on your pants. Get the shirt off, quick."

He went to an old leather-bound trunk in the corner, taking out a fresh shirt. Phil had slipped from one sleeve of his own shirt, and Garland helped him strip the rest off. He saw that the wound was in the shoulder. He found a piece of clean cotton and folded it into a compress, then tore strips off of Phil's shirt to bind it. Then he helped the boy into his shirt, getting a dipperful of water to wash his face and hands of mud. After this he took the bloody remnants of the shirt, and picked up his own wet slicker and overcoat, taking them out into the breezeway and burying them beneath the gear there. Then he went back in and fished a bottle of whisky and a pack of cards from the cupboard. He poured a big drink of whisky for the boy, and while Phil drank this, took a handful of carefully hoarded coins from a pot and put it on the table. He fished out a couple of aces and three low numbers for his hand, and gave Phil seven, eight, nine, and a couple of face cards.

The horse whinnied in the corral again. The excitement of it filled Garland's eyes with a bright glow.

"Think you can do it?" he asked.

"I'll try," Phil told him weakly.

At this moment, there was the muffled sound of horses approaching, the suction of boots in mud. Then these boots clattered on the puncheon flooring of the breezeway, and the door shuddered beneath a knock.

Garland scraped his chair out, and rose to open the door. Sheriff Waco Sheridan stood there, with his deputy, Hack Cameron; behind them John Roman, Agate Ayers, and Louis Obermier. Sheriff Sheridan was tall and stooped through the shoulders, as if from the weight of his official responsibilities. Only a close study would reveal the searching quality to his eyes.

"Evening, Quintin," he murmured. His glance took in the whole room with one quick slice.

"Evening, Sheriff," answered Garland. He could still not hide the hostility in his eyes, as they ran on to John Roman.

"Now you ain't going to let an old grudge clabber the milk, are you?" asked the sheriff.

"I can't help how I feel about some things," answered Garland. "But I guess I wouldn't leave a dog out on a night like this."

He stepped back and allowed them to enter. Hack Cameron followed the sheriff, a younger man, with black hair the rain had dampened till it lay against his temples and at the back of his neck in tight ringlets. Louis Obermier followed. He was the biggest cattleman in the county, next to Roman—a man not much over five feet tall, built like a beer keg, his short-cropped head as square as a blockhouse.

Then it was Roman, the pelt of his

bearskin coat turned curly by the rain, shaking the puncheon flooring with his aggressive weight. Agate Ayers followed him in, and that was all, though Garland could hear the muttering talk of other riders outside. Garland saw the sheriff's eyes cross the floor, beneath their feet, and then raise to Phil.

"Stud?" he asked.

"Draw," Phil smiled.

Sheriff Sheridan shifted idly to the table, taking up the hand of cards Garland had put down, and looking at them without letting Phil see. He pouted his lips in approval, and lay the hand back, face down.

"On the trail of something, Waco?" Garland said.

"What makes you think that, Quintin?" asked the sheriff.

"You always get that hound-dog look, Waco. How about a drink to take the curse off this night?"

"Sounds good," answered the sheriff. "Been playing long, Phil?"

"Not long," answered Phil.

The heat was beginning to draw the rank smell of wet wool from the men now, as Garland moved over to the shelf and took some tin cups down. He poured a drink for the sheriff first. Sheridan accepted it and backed up to the bed, lowering himself onto this with a tired wheeze. He idly rubbed a forefinger down one edge of the blankets.

"Anybody else passed this way tonight?" Sheridan asked, raising his eyes suddenly to catch Garland watching him.

Garland dropped his glance quickly to the cup he was filling. But a sharp relief filled him. There had been none of Phil's blood on Sheridan's finger.

"We wouldn't have heard them if they did, in this weather," Garland said. "Hide rustlers, Sheriff?"

"What else?" asked Obermier, glaring at the whisky in his cup. "A couple of my boys come across a cut of my beef being run across Mexican Creek toward the Big Thicket. The rustlers got away, but we think one of them got clipped."

"Trail run past here?" asked Garland, handing out Roman's drink. The man took it in one gulp.

The sheriff's squinted eyes passed idly across Phil's pants leg. "We lost the trail a couple of miles south," he said. "Thought you might be coming home about this time and see somebody."

With the drinks passed out, Garland moved to the fire and bent to stoke another length of wood in. He let his own eyes pass over Phil's pants. Another settling of relief ran through him as he saw that the mud was almost dry on the cloth.

"How's things over Manatte way, Phil?" Sheridan asked.

"Just fine, Sheriff, just fine," grinned Phil.

Garland wondered if the others could see the strained little lines about the boy's mouth. A silvery film passed across Phil's blue eyes and Garland saw his hand lift to the table feebly, as if for support. Garland straightened swiftly, hoping his movement would draw their attention.

"Wish the place was bigger. The rest of your posse could come in."

Sheridan was building himself a cigarette, and put his sack of tobacco on the bed while he rolled the smoke. "That's all right. We'll be going in a minute."

"How's things up Copper Bluffs way, Garland?" Roman asked.

Garland placed his back to the fire,

spreading his legs out. "I guess you ought to know, Roman."

"Had any clients lately?" Roman asked.

"What's it to you?"

"Lawyer needs clients to keep him in business. That last client you had didn't do so well."

"That'll do, Roman," said Waco Sheridan. His voice was not loud, but it cut off their sounds and movements sharply with its brittle authority. He rose and walked to the wall, wiping a match down this to ignite it. "We didn't come here for that," he murmured, lifting the match to his cigarette. "Did we, Phil?"

The boy had been staring at the floor with a glassy expression in his eyes, and he jumped faintly. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah."

"Yeah what?"

Phil's chin dug into his neck, and a chuckle shook him, surprising Garland. "You can't lock two fighting cocks in a pen without they start spurring at each other, Sheriff," the boy said.

A droll grin tilted Sheridan's pursed mouth. "No, I guess you can't." His eyes brushed a corner of the room. "I guess you can't."

Agate cleared his throat roughly. Obermier moved over to set his empty cup down, pulling at his nose. Garland saw minute beads of sweat breaking out across Phil's forehead. That last effort of concentration had taken a lot from him. Hack Cameron was studying the boy soberly. Garland knew he had to take their attention off Phil again.

"What are you looking for, Waco?" he said. "I never did think there was much sport playing a fish."

Sheridan raised his brows. "We weren't looking for nothing, Quintin. You have a guilty conscience?"

"Man wouldn't have to have a guilty conscience, the way the bunch of you are acting. Maybe you'd like to search the place for hides?"

Sheridan grinned. "Now don't get your neck swelled up. We'll be going. See anything, let us know."

He dropped his half-smoked cigarette, ground it out, nodded at the others. Hack Cameron turned to open the door, and Obermier wheeled to follow. Roman did not move.

"This isn't finished, Garland," he said.

Sheridan squeezed Roman's arm. "Take it easy, John."

Roman stared at Garland a moment longer. Then he made a snorting sound and wheeled to stamp out, shaking the whole house. Sheridan smiled wryly at Garland, nodded to Phil, and went out. As Garland closed the door behind him, Phil let out a long sigh, and started bending over to put his head on the table.

"Not yet," Garland said, whirling to him. "Hang on another minute. I know Sheridan. Hang on."

He straightened the boy up, poured him another drink. Phil's eyes looked like a sleepy child's, unable to focus. Before Garland could lift the drink to his lips, the door scraped open again. He turned to see Waco Sheridan standing there.

"Forgot my Bull Durham sack," said the sheriff ruefully.

Garland set the glass down. "Yes," he said. "On the bed, I guess."

He turned to get it. With each step he waited for the sound of Phil's body sliding from the chair. He picked up the tobacco sack. The sheriff's boots scraped restlessly against the damp outer floor. Garland turned back. Phil

was sitting stiffly in the chair, chin settled into his neck so deeply it left furrows of slack flesh.

"How's the family, Phil?"

The pause after that pounded against Garland's nerves. Then Phil raised his head, smiling. "Just fine, Sheriff. Drop in if you're out our way. Still some of that peach left."

Sheridan's lips shaped into a pouting smile. "That I will."

Those grained wrinkles formed their studying network about his eyes, as he took the sack from Garland's hand. He touched the dripping brim of his hat and turned to go out. Garland shut the door. He stood facing it till he heard the squeak of saddle leather.

From behind him there was a faint gasp. Garland wheeled to see Phil slide out of the chair and onto the floor, unconscious.

Chapter Six

John Roman's Land

THE day after the hog hunt, Blacklaws rode to the coast. Carew had told him they had checked this section carefully, but Blacklaws wanted a look for himself. He could not go due south from his line shack; that would have taken him directly into Congo Bog. He headed east to the Sabine, and followed the river. He reached Lake Sabine before noon and followed its borders to Sabine Pass and thence to the sea. He rested his horse among the dunes, letting the refreshment of salt air and snowy surf fill him deeply.

Then he turned west, picking up the first deserted village within a couple of miles. This had been used by shrimpers in the early days, until a succession of hurricanes had driven them out. Now the forlorn hovels were half-buried in sand, the palm thatching of their roofs long ago swept off.

There were only two logical channels by which the hide rustlers could market their stuff—overland to Galveston, or by sea to New Orleans and other eastern ports. If they did it by sea, this was the kind of place they would use, bringing the hides and tallow down here through the bayous on pirogues and flatboats, and then hauling them out to a waiting schooner in surfboats. But Blacklaws found no fresh sign in the shrimp village.

He rode on west, coming across half a dozen more likely spots, none showing signs of recent use. The early-afternoon sun was burning at his face when he reached the marsh. It was here he found the fresh hoofprints. They were of two horses, walking along the marsh.

Tar Baby suddenly threw up her head and whinnied. Blacklaws straightened from his study. At the same moment, a pair of riders lifted up over the dunes ahead of him and came to a sharp halt on top. One of them had an old Ward-Burton across his animal's withers, and he swung it around to cover Blacklaws. His smoky eyes reflected a careful watchfulness.

"You're not on free range now, stranger. This is John Roman's land."

Blacklaws shrugged. "Didn't know he'd spread this far east. How long you been working for him?"

"I'll ask the questions," answered the man. "My name's Lee Deff. This is Eddie Hyde."

"I'm Kenny Blacklaws."

There was silence after that. The

wind whipped salt spray against the horses and filled them with new vinegar. The man Deff had called Eddie Hyde shifted restively in his rawhide-laced saddle. There was a gathered compactness to his body, and his face had the keen edge of a honed blade.

"What the hell," he said. "We going to take him in?"

"There's been too much hide rustling around here," Deff told Blacklaws. "Roman's had to start keeping strangers off his land. He'll want to know what you're here for and I think you better tell him in person. Just lift your reins and line out along this marsh."

Blacklaws did as they asked without speaking. There was no particular reluctance in him, or anger; he might as well see Roman while he was down this way. The white shore broke up into dunes that formed a veritable labyrinth across the beach. The marsh became long fingers of stagnant water thrusting themselves down the troughs between these dunes.

The stench began to reach Blacklaws before he saw the house. It grew so strong it almost gagged him. It was the compounded smell of rotten meat and blood and rendered tallow that always marked a packery.

Blacklaws wound out from between the dunes and saw the first pens. They were sprawled out across the beach, filled with the restless movement of bawling cattle. Nearer the water were three long slaughter shanties and a half-dozen big wooden vats encrusted with dirty brine, where the tallow was rendered. A rickety pier ran out beyond the surf, and a couple of dories were drawn up above the high-water mark.

Then it was the house. It brought back the past poignantly. During the two years that Blacklaws's mother had been married to Martin Garland, she and Martin had often attended the cotillions given by Roman and his wife. Blacklaws and Quintin Garland had both come, to play with the other children in the gardens while their parents danced in the great parlor.

The house still looked splendid from here, set up on the high bluff overlooking the sea, its six white columns gleaming like marble. It had been built early in the century by a cotton planter, who had sold it to Roman when Roman got rich driving cattle to the Louisiana markets.

As Blacklaws drew nearer, however, he began to see the deterioration the war and the death of Roman's wife had wrought on the house. Azaleas and camillias had once spread their colorful profusion beneath the post oaks lining the winding drive; now only catclaw and agrita choked the space, reaching across the road in a thorny tangle. The white paint was peeling off the pillars, and their bases were mottled by a mold-green of age and neglect. Most of the small panes in the fanlight above the door had been smashed out, to lie in glittering heaps of glass on either side of the portal.

Blacklaws dismounted at Deff's bidding. Both Deff and Hyde followed him across the porch. Hyde opened the door. Again it was the impact of the past. The sixty-five-foot center hall thrusting its shadowed chasm through the length of the house had been Mrs. Roman's pride. Now the French, hand-blocked wall paper was peeling off in browning crusts, the Adamesque mirrors were cracked and filmed with dust.

From the parlor came the clink of glasses. Deff nodded for Blacklaws to turn in there. The room was heavily shadowed, even this early in the aft-

ernoon. Only one or two of the original velvet drapes remained; soiled cheesecloth or dirty gunnysacking had been pinned up over the rest of the windows, cutting out much of the light. The remainder of the room reflected the same squalor. The corners were heaped with litters of bones and empty tin cans and cast-off clothing and gear.

Gauche Sallier stood at the marble mantel, a half-emptied glass in one feminine hand. John Roman's bulk filled a wing chair before the hearth, its leather upholstery torn and scarred by cigar burns. Roman was in shirt sleeves, the cuffs rolled back off hairy forearms, and had been lighting a cigar when Blacklaws entered. He turned to see who had entered.

"We found him up toward the Pass," Lee Deff said.

Roman waved out the match just before it burned him, dropped it on the floor. He studied Blacklaws silently. Then he pointed the cigar casually at the man across from him.

"You know Harry Sharp?"

"Not formally," Blacklaws said. "I've heard of his Dollar Sign."

"This is Blacklaws, Harry," Roman murmured. "Martin Garland's stepson."

"Oh." The word left Sharp in soft understanding. He was seated across from Roman, a tall man in an impeccably tailored steel pen coat and fawn-colored trousers, a graceful indolence to the way he was sprawled on the divan. He had a sharp, angular face and a luxuriant head of red hair.

Roman lit another match, drew on his cigar till it was going, then let out a stream of smoke. "I suppose Deff told you how picky I am about anybody riding my pastures," he said.

"Times have changed," Blacklaws said.

Roman spat. "I know what you're thinking. You're right. Having everybody in Jefferson County swarming over this place was Mrs. Roman's doings. She's been dead seven years now, Kenny, and I'm just a crusty old widower without the softening influence of a woman."

He paused, staring beyond Sharp, out the windows. For a moment Blacklaws saw a tiredness in the man. Then Roman broke the mood, swinging his scarred head around sharply.

"Taken any more Double Sickle stuff?"

"Haven't come across any dead ones," Blacklaws said.

"That right, Gauche?" asked Roman.

"As far as I know, *M'sieu*."

"How about the live ones?"

"You know what I told you about that," Blacklaws said.

"You wasn't in on last night's rustling, then?"

"Somebody pick up a cut of stuff last night?"

"Obermier's stuff," Sharp said indifferently. "Rustler got wounded in the fight and they followed him as far as Bayou Lafitte."

"How could you trail him in that rain?" Blacklaws asked.

"We didn't trail," Roman muttered. "We were close enough to follow the man. A couple of Obermier's riders come across the rustlers at work and clipped one of them. An Obermier man followed the wounded rustler while the other tailed it for Obermier's house. I was visiting the old Dutchman. We sent a man after the sheriff and then took out. We picked the Obermier man up near Bayou Lafitte. He'd lost the rustler and his sign too."

Roman tilted his bald head back, looking up at Blacklaws. "You weren't

down by Bayou Lafitte last night, were you?"

"Would you like to stand on your feet and say that?" Blacklaws said.

Roman's eyes widened in surprise, spreading their pawky pouches. Then he leaned forward with a grunt, grabbing the arms of the chair and spreading his boots to take his weight.

"Oh, don't be a fool, John," Sharp said disgustedly. "What did you expect? No honest man is going to let you imply things like that. At least not any man with sand in him. You're getting an obsession about this thing. Not everybody in the world is a hide rustler."

Roman settled back into the chair. He threw back his head so suddenly it startled Blacklaws. That guttural laugh filled the room, then dwindled off to a row of chuckles that shook Roman's beefy belly.

"You looked ready to tromp me, Kenny. I thought you couldn't be prodded."

"I'm just tired of being called a rustler, Roman. Don't do it again."

The coarse humor had left Roman again. "Kenny," he said. "I'll do what I please when I please. I wouldn't advise you to be found on my land again." He looked up at Blacklaws, as if expecting some answer. When Blacklaws gave none, he slapped the arm of his chair with a calloused palm. "All right," he snorted. "Have a drink before you go anyway."

"It's a long ride back. I'd better get started."

"Suit yourself."

As Blacklaws turned to go, his gaze swung across Gauche Sallier. The Creole was watching him intently from those sooty eyes.

"How right you are, *M'sieu*," Sallier said. "It is a long ride back—isn't it?"

Chapter Seven

Scars

THOUGH spring was near, the inevitable fogs of winter still rolled in off the coast and steamed up out of the bayous, saturating the countryside with a pearly mist in which the underbrush and timber swam like the rootless vegetation of some mysterious underworld. The moisture gathered densely on everything, beading branch and foliage so heavily that the whole forest seemed to have broken out in a jeweled sweat.

To some it would have been moody and depressing, but to Corsica it was only another fascinating phase of this place she loved. She welcomed the sense of merging her identity with the sad cypresses and the ancient post oaks that crept mistily past her as she let her horse pick its way along the river road. Her pleasure in the land was not as keen as usual, however, for the worry of Phil preoccupied her.

He had returned from the hog hunt with Dee, both of them loaded down with side meat and lard. Dee had taken the wagon back to Rouquette's to get the rest of the meat, but Phil had gone into town. He had not returned that night, or the next day. Now, on the second morning of Phil's absence, she was riding to Blacklaws's, hoping he might have an idea where the boy was.

She wore her fawn-colored riding-habit, its draped skirt faithfully outlining the nubile curve of her hip and thigh against the saddle leathers. The tailored jacket only partly obscured the striking fullness of her breasts, and the pork-pie hat, blue as her eyes, sat

jauntily on the back of her glossy coif, the soft feather in its brim ruffling against the nape of her neck with her slightest movement.

As she turned off the river road onto the cattle trail that led to Smoky Canes, she found her worry about Phil subdued by a strange new mixture of emotions. As before, she found it hard to separate or define the feelings that came with thought of Blacklaws. There was that obscure mingling of reluctance and eagerness she had felt the first night. Only the reluctance seemed sharper, after what had happened between Garland and Blacklaws. If she were to stand by Quintin's side, as a woman in love should, she would have to cut all the ties that bound her and Blacklaws.

She found angry revolt rising up in her at this. It wasn't fair. It was small of Garland. Then she tried to block this off. Why should it cut so deeply? Kenny had been gone nine years, they had only been kids when he left. Why should she feel this way?

It put her in such a sudden turmoil that she was afraid to analyze it any farther, and she lifted her horse into a canter as she went on down the trail to the cut-off. This took her into the dense stands of loblolly pines and eventually into the salt-grass meadow by the canes.

She saw that the corral was empty. She hitched her horse and found the door unlatched and went in and stood there a long while looking around the room. As old and delapidated as the shack was, it had a neat, ordered appearance.

She was still standing there when she heard her horse whinny, and turned, to see Blacklaws through the doorway, swinging off Tar Baby. His heavy shoulders dragged a little, and a tired gauntness deepened the lines about his mouth and made his face look older, till he smiled.

"Not often I have such a distinguished guest," he said, coming in.

"Not often I get out, the way Dad is," she answered. "You look like you've spent the night in a barn."

He grinned ruefully. "Not quite a barn. Been down to the coast. Didn't get back in time and had to camp out. Have a seat and I'll rustle up something to eat."

He shrugged out of his grimy ducking jacket, and without closing the door, took up the half-filled bucket and filled the coffeepot. Setting this on the stove and lighting the fire, he then rolled up his sleeves and proceeded to wash in the remaining water.

"I really came down to ask if you'd seen Phil," she said. "He left the evening of the hog hunt for town. He hasn't been home since."

"Haven't seen him since the hog hunt. Isn't the kid getting old enough to take a little ride by himself once in a while?"

"He always tells me where he's going," she said. "Nobody in town had seen him. I went to Sheriff Sheridan's office, but he was out."

"Mock's?"

"I don't think Phil knows the way to Mock's. The deepest into Congo Bog either of the boys have ever been is *Cheniere Dominique.*"

"How about hunting? Phil's coon dogs gone?"

She shook her head. "Josh and Moe were killed last December. That was when Phil and Dee saw *Cheniere Dominique.* They were shot at. Both dogs were killed before they got out."

"How did they get that far into the

Bog in the first place?"

Corsica shrugged. "Chasing a coon, I suppose. Probably couldn't stop the dogs."

He turned from washing and went to get a towel. His gaze found hers and held it a moment. Then he turned away sharply, wiping his hands, to get coffee off the shelf.

"Kenny," she said. "Do you still think I brought you and Quintin together deliberately the other night?"

He shrugged. "What does it matter?"

"*Something* is between us," she said.

"A person changes a lot in nine years."

"You have, Kenny. You didn't use to be afraid of emotions."

"And now," he said, "you think I am?"

"I know you are," she said. "That wasn't just anger you felt with Quintin the other night. You were afraid."

"Of Quintin?" he asked ironically.

"Of course not. You were afraid of yourself. Of that anger. Afraid you wouldn't be able to control it. Isn't that true?"

"You seem to know."

"Kenny, why won't you trust me?"

He turned to her, eyes somber and withdrawn. "Have I any reason to?"

A hurt expression started forming in her face; she blanketed that off, settling back in the chair, speaking deliberately.

"In my closet is a whip. It has Martin Garland's name on the stock. I found it hidden in my father's room two years ago. I tried to get the story, but you know how Dad is. He says he can't remember." She bent toward him. "It's one of the things that would link you with Martin's death. Everybody knew how often Martin took you down there to whip you. I haven't turned it in. Now, won't you trust me?"

For just a moment, she saw defense shred in his eyes. Then he turned away from her and moved to the door, staring out into the foggy meadow.

"Kenny, if the killing was accidental, who can blame you? Martin took you down there to whip you, there was a fight, you didn't mean to kill him. Who'd condemn you for that? If that's what happened, you're a fool for letting it stand between us."

He still did not turn around. She stared at the broad planes of muscle in his neck.

She took a resigned breath. "All right. I don't blame you for not trusting me. Even if the killing was accidental. I suppose you're smart in not admitting anything. But that won't help what's happened inside. You feel anger with Quintin, and you're afraid. What are you afraid of where I'm concerned, Kenny?"

He spoke tightly. "You seem to know all the answers."

She settled back. "You're afraid of anger. I think you're afraid of all your other feelings too."

He did not answer. She found herself leaning forward in a poignant desire to help him.

"Agate got drunk the other day and told around town about the fight you had with Roman and Sallier over the hide," she told him. "Agate said you didn't get very mad. Is it that way with everybody else? You've gotten yourself so under control that nobody can make you mad—except Quintin."

He did not answer yet, but the cord in his neck was standing out so heavily now she could see the pulse beat in it.

"Quintin was Martin's son, there's always been that hatred between you,

he was so closely identified with Martin and all that happened. You see Martin all over again, in Quintin."

"Corsica—"

Triumph brought her up out of the chair, as she saw how she was scoring. "You feel so guilty it's scarred your life. It's made you afraid of the anger that led you to kill Martin Garland. And Quintin's come to stand for the whole thing. You're afraid he'll goad you to fighting again, and you're afraid you'll do the same thing with him you did with Martin. You keep remembering the way Martin looked, lying there with his face so beaten in nobody could recognize it—"

He turned so sharply it cut her off. She stared up at his face in a fascinated way, waiting for him to speak.

"What did you say about Martin's face?" he asked.

"I didn't see him. The doctor told us how badly he was beaten. What's the matter, Kenny?"

His withdrawal was as palpable as if he had stepped back from her, though he had not moved. "Nothing," he said.

"Kenny," she said breathlessly. "Won't you even admit it now? I told you the killing wouldn't stand between us if it was accidental. It's what happened inside you that's between us. It's not natural. You can't drain yourself of emotions. You might control them, but you can't stop feeling things completely—"

"Can't I?" His voice was brittle.

"Can you?"

It left her on a breath. Her whole body had risen toward him in her demand, till her breasts were against his chest. She felt the tremor run through him. His arms went about her and her breasts flattened against his chest and his lips came down to hers.

She did not know how long it lasted. When he let her go, and she pulled back, they were both breathing heavily. She stared up at him with a chaotic mind. She turned blindly out the door and went to her horse and got on. She wheeled the roan across the meadow.

When she reached the trees she turned to look at his heavy-shouldered figure standing in the doorway, staring after her. She tried to see the expression on his face, and couldn't, and realized that was because of the tears in her eyes. She turned the horse and kicked it into a dead run down the trail.

Chapter Eight

"Detecting's a Dirty Game."

AFTER Corsica had gone, Blacklaws went back inside and sat down. For a long while no clear thought would come to him. He only knew how shaken he was by his desire for her. He had been helpless before it. All the control he had cultivated through the long years had been swept away by it.

Dimly he saw the danger of that. The emotion he felt for her fell in the same category as what he felt for Quintin. To him it was as much a weakness as drink or gambling, and could ruin a man as surely.

For a moment there he had been on the verge of telling her the whole ugly picture of Martin Garland's death. The maternal concern, the sympathy, the compassion he had seen in her had drawn up a need for release so great it gagged him.

And if I trusted her and told her

about Martin Garland, how long before I told her why I really came back? That's the next logical step, isn't it? And what if I told her? Do I know yet where she really stands? It looks more than ever as if Phil's mixed up with the rustlers. How do I know it's only Phil? I'd be a fool to trust her. I almost ruined everything.

He rose in an unsupportable restlessness, trying to order his thoughts. But they swam wildly in his head. Now it was what she had said about Martin's face.

How could it have been beaten that way? he thought. *Martin hit his head on a rock when he went down. That couldn't have messed his face up. I didn't hit him after he went down. Or did I?*

That stopped Blacklaws's restless pacing for a moment. Could his rage have been so deep that he didn't remember? He forced himself to try and recall other details of that night. Some came. Some wouldn't. He tried to thresh it out for a while and got so knotted up he had to quit. He tried to drive it from his mind as he made breakfast.

Something else began pushing him now, as he ate. Last night he had tried to reach Mexican Creek, where Roman had said the rustling took place. But his horse had played out, forcing him to halt near midnight. For his ride to the coast, he had taken only enough food for two days, and this morning he had detoured back to his line shack for more supplies. He meant to try and pick up that sign of the rustlers, cold as it would be, and follow it out, and that might take several days.

After adding more coffee and beans and bacon to his saddle roll, he took it out and lashed it on behind the cantle, along with his coffeepot and frying pan. Then he lined out westward along the cattle trail.

Now he was beginning to wonder about *Cheniere Dominique.* Corsica had said Phil and Dee had been shot at down there. It was a definite clue. Had it been unintentional on her part? Or had she planted it in his mind deliberately? And what significance could it have? Did she want to drive him to the place or away from it?

He came to a turn in the trail, and it swung his vision around till a corner of it picked up the horsebacker following him about twenty feet behind. He reined up sharply, wheeling his bronc.

"I'd of been Quintin Garland, I could have cut you down and you'd never know who did it," chuckled Charlie Carew, riding unhurriedly on up. "First time I ever seen you off guard, Kenny. You must have been thinking hard."

Blacklaws tipped his head toward the trees, and they rode through a pair of cypresses, to a glade hidden from the trail.

"Hear you killed Tate's pet hog," said Carew, pulling up.

"It would have killed us."

"I'd hate to be on that crazy Tate's list," Carew said. His cigar bobbed up and down with the words.

Blacklaws turned Tar Baby to face the detective's whey-bellied mare, and then rode in till he was knee-to-knee with Carew. "You didn't tell me about Martin Garland's face, Charlie. All beaten in with a rock so he could hardly be recognized."

Carew frowned in a puzzled way. "I didn't think I'd have to, Kenny."

Blacklaws reached up suddenly to grab the man's shirt by the collar,

twisting his fist in the cloth till the collar dug into the slack folds of Carew's neck. Carew caught spasmodically at Blacklaws's wrist, but Blacklaws lifted him up out of the saddle.

"Tell me just what you know and just what you don't know, Charlie. I'm tired of this dirty little game you're playing."

"You're choking me, Kenny. Let me down. Why should I bring up Martin's face? You'd know."

"Would I?" Blacklaws let him settle into the saddle, without loosening his grip. "What about the whip?"

"I told you we had it."

Blacklaws lifted him upward again. "You're a liar."

"All right. All right. We don't have it."

"What about the man who saw Martin Garland killed?"

"You can't expect me to tip my hand so soon. Kenny—"

"Was it Troy Manatte?" Blacklaws twisted and lifted.

"All right," gasped Carew. "Let me down. Troy Manatte."

Blacklaws dropped him back into the saddle, still not releasing him. "Troy couldn't have told you anything that would stand up in court. He can't even remember what he did yesterday. You just got to talking with him and pieced a few things together. You haven't got any man who saw Martin Garland killed. I ought to bust your guts."

He released Carew with a disgusted sound. Carew removed his cigar, rubbing at his neck with the other hand.

"Never knew you was that strong, Kenny," he muttered. Then his sly humor returned, with effort. "Thought you was the man who wouldn't get mad?"

Blacklaws drew in a heavy breath. "I'm not mad at you. I wish I was. It would help."

Carew shook his head sadly. "Detecting's a dirty game, Kenny. And now you're going." He waited for Blacklaws, but when no answer came, Carew murmured, "I offered you a hundred and fifty a month in the letter. How about two hundred?"

Blacklaws was staring blankly at the trees, and hardly heard the man. "Charlie, what about Phil Manatte?"

"I should have known, Kenny. Corsica's the reason you came back in the first place. And now that you've seen the trouble she's in, you can't step out."

"What about Phil?" asked Blacklaws doggedly.

Carew shrugged. "Nothing definite. Roman and Sheridan were hot on the trail of a wounded hide rustler the night of the hog hunt. His trail ran near Garland's place. They stopped in and found Garland and Phil playing poker. Sheridan said he was suspicious at first, but everything looked all right."

"Why should Garland shield Phil?"

"You're assuming Phil is one of the rustlers?"

"For argument's sake," Blacklaws said. "From two sources, I've heard that Garland has passed word he has something which will enable the rustlers to take as many hides as they want, and Roman or Obermier won't be able to touch them."

Carew shook his head admiringly. "That's what I meant when I said you could get things a man connected with the law couldn't, Kenny. I never heard anything like that."

Blacklaws was still looking beyond Carew. "Say the rustlers haven't taken Garland up. Garland still wants to con-

tact them. He says he'll help Phil if Phil will lead him to that hidden packery."

"Sounds logical."

"If Phil's in it, I want to know why, Charlie. Has the Association got any connections that would enable them to check up on the Manatte investments and how they're doing?"

"We can do that. Anything else?"

There was a protracted silence. Chewing on his cigar, Carew squinted at Blacklaws.

"Hate me, Kenny?"

Blacklaws focused his eyes on the man, speaking in a low voice. "I don't really know how I feel toward you, Charlie."

Something sly entered Carew's eyes. "You're not free of the brush yet, Kenny. Remember, if Garland got the slightest evidence in his hands, he'd have a warrant out for you that minute. It would be a slim case, but he'd push it. And that whip is still evidence—"

"Don't get carried away with yourself, Charlie." Blacklaws leaned toward the man, his voice softening. "And don't use this to threaten me with again."

Chapter Nine

Cheniere Dominique

ITH Carew behind, Blacklaws pointed Tar Baby to the westward through an exotic land of swamp and bayou. Finally he broke from this into the salt-grass prairies, and came upon one of Obermier's snake fences, following its meandering course for some distance. He never caught sight of the house, but the nauseating odors of the slaughtering-pens reached him, for Obermier stripped his own hides and salted his meat as did most of the other big operators in the region.

There had been no mention of exactly where along Mexican Creek the rustling took place, but if it had been Obermier's beef, it would be somewhere in the vicinity of his pastures. Blacklaws passed the extreme western margins of the Obermier land and rode on till he struck the creek, then turned northward through the meadows and timber banding this water, hunting for the tracks in the more open spots where cattle would browse. The rain had blotted most of the ground sign out, but finally he found where a big cut of beef had been pushed hard through a stand of timber, chipping off bark and leaving patches of hair in the thorny brush. He got the general direction of the run by this. It headed across Mexican Creek at a ford. He found more sign leading him to the Neches, and a second ford here. Coming out on the other side of the river now, his mind began to work.

It had always seemed strange to Blacklaws that the rustlers so consistently left a trail leading into the Big Thicket. The Thicket was a logical place for the hide factory to be. Yet it still seemed odd that rustlers clever enough to elude the law so long would advertise their hide-out so blatantly.

It had put something in his mind. He was always one to look for sign other than the obvious. Now that habit began to focus itself, as he followed the meager sign of this trail.

It stopped raining about eight o'clock on the night of the rustling, he thought. *My only chance is that they were still running when the storm quit.*

Rain had washed out the tracks west of the Neches. Blacklaws barely hung on by much circling and studying of the brush and timber. About a mile west of the river, he came upon a strip of white cloth stuck on a bush. The Obermier rider had obviously torn up his shirt to leave sign the posse could follow. This must have been where the wounded rustler turned off then, and the Obermier rider after him. Rain had blotted all the ground-sign out here too, and that strip of cloth was all Blacklaws had to go on.

He did not turn off here, but headed west, following the main bunch, in another mile of painful search for sign. Then suddenly he found tracks on the ground.

The rain stopped here, he thought. *And these are the rustlers and the steers. Prints of both horses and cattle, far apart as they can stretch. That means they're still running like hell. What are these overlapping prints, then? They look all shod, and they're walking. There's that bad calk on Hack Cameron's right front. Won't he ever get it fixed? Sheridan must have sent Cameron and a few men after this bunch while the sheriff and Roman turned off after that wounded rustler.*

Blacklaws followed the trail on westward, toward the Big Thicket. Now, with ground-sign to read, he was watching the edges of the trail even more closely for a turnoff. He found one within another mile. It was a single man, prints far apart. One of the running rustlers.

Blacklaws went another half mile, on foot now and leading Tar Baby, taking infinite pains to pick up all the sign along the edges of the trail. A man not half-expecting it would never have seen it. It was a patch of hide on a tree that caught his eye.

Red and white and speckled. Looks like a sabina steer. Too far off to be the main bunch. Have they turned some of the beef off here? Looks like erased prints on the ground. The whole bunch would have left more sign than this. So only part of the steers were turned off here, by a couple of men, and the sign blotted out so good that a man following wouldn't find it unless he was looking for it.

And the posse hadn't found it. They had gone right on by, following that main bunch up the trail toward the Big Thicket. Blacklaws went in that direction too. A few hundred yards on he found a spot where another small cut of steers had been turned off into the trees. It was on a rocky ledge, where they would leave little sign. But Blacklaws had been watching for it, and a broken length of brush spotted it for him. However, he still followed the main trail till he came to a point where yet a third cut of steers had been turned off. This time he followed them.

Within the timber, the riders had quit trying to hide sign. It led him away from the main trail at right angles for half a mile, then turned back toward the river. This sign joined the sign of the second small bunch that had been turned off, then the first bunch, and all three groups were driven together till they reached the river, and put right down into the water.

Blacklaws sat his horse here, seeing the pattern now. Only a few cattle of the original bunch would be left, spread out to make it look as big as

the bunch had first been, leaving a false trail for the posse that led right into the Big Thicket. Once inside, it would not be hard to scatter and leave the posse at the end of their sign. While actually, the major portion of the original steers had been diverted off the trail long before reaching the Thicket, a small group at a time, at a spot where it would not show, to be gathered out in timber, and then be driven back to the river. And then where?

North along the Neches was Sharp's Dollar Sign, and beyond that the eastern fringe of the Thicket itself, a hundred miles of river and jungle in which they might have turned up out of the water at any point. A hopeless job for a single man to find that point soon enough to do him any good. And south? About as hopeless. Fifteen miles of swampland, a big part of it the western edge of Congo Bog.

Blacklaws had found one of the things he wanted—the pattern of their operations. It was a clever scheme, for all its simplicity. They had consistently made it appear as if they were driving the cattle into the Thicket, until everyone took it for granted that the hide factory was there. Then they had been free to turn the majority of their rustled stock into the waters of the Neches or the Sabine or a near-by bayou, driving it through the shallows for miles to leave no sign, and eventually take the beef wherever they chose.

Blacklaws went back to the trail till he came to the place where the wounded man had turned off. He did not even stop here. If Sheridan and the posse had been unable to find that man, he would have little chance now. He rode on to where the second man had turned off. This was different. None of the posse had followed this one. Blacklaws wanted to know where he had gone.

It was a more exacting job now. Often he lost the trail and had to stop and circle to pick it up again. It took all his skill and patience, leading him ever southward, paralleling the river for some miles, then crossing to head eastward till he was out of sight of the Neches. Finally he reached what he thought was the southern section of Bayou Lafitte. The trail led down the bank of a ford here, and he splashed across, picking up sign easily on the other side. He halted, however, getting down.

There was something different here. The animal Blacklaws was following possessed nothing unusual in the prints it left. Yet, he was filled with the sense of something changed.

He looked back across the bayou. Why should he feel this way? It could be no other horse. He rose, putting it down to his own tension, and mounted again, and once more took up the trail.

The woodlands became more dense and luxuriant, cypress swamps appearing on either side of the trail. The cloying scent of swamp flowers mingled with the rotten odors of bayou mud. Oxbow lakes began to appear, crescent-shaped sections of the river that had been cut off in earlier times to leave curving bodies of water.

Then the first *cheniere* appeared. These were ancient barrier beaches, formed when the ocean covered this section of the land, built of shells piled up by the wind through centuries. When the ocean receded, it had left these ridges of crushed shells behind. With the forming of the swamps and bayous, the shell-ridges that remained above water became islands, collecting sand and earth through the years

till they would support undergrowth and timber.

Along this section of the coast, there were no shell-islands north of Congo Bog. That meant he was already within the limits of the Bog.

Blacklaws stared down at the ground, thinking that the man he was following must have known the way, or he wouldn't have taken this route. He had the feeling that he was on the trail of something more definite than he had been working with. Blacklaws slackened the reins, touched Tar Baby with a heel, and rode on into the Bog.

It was late afternoon, but the twilight filling long stretches of the trail would be there at any time of day, so thick was the canopy of cypress and post oak overhead. It gave the effect of a mauve dream-world, smoky and unreal. Parrots squawked obscenely from the palmettos. Snakes slithered across the grassed-over trail, spooking his bronc more than once, and herons stamped the glassy waters of swamp pools with their clownish, one-legged reflections.

Day was failing when he came into view of a bayou looping its way southward. It widened here till it reached more than a half a mile from bank to bank and in its center Blacklaws could see the largest shell-island he had come across yet, with the rotting skeleton of a ship's boat sunk into the spit of sand and mud at one end. *Cheniere Dominique?*

He had never seen it before. But its legends were another part of Congo Bog. Jean Lafitte, the pirate of New Orleans, was known to have anchored his ships in the Sabine, and to have frequented the country along the river. When Lafitte was captured in 1836, according to the story, his lieutenant, Dominique, had escaped into Congo Bog with the remnants of the pirate crew, to establish headquarters there on *Cheniere Dominique.* Staring at that rotting ship's boat out on the island now, Blacklaws was filled with an eerie sensation. But something else too was in his mind. *Cheniere Dominique,* Corsica had said.

He had lost the tracks of the man within a few yards of the bayou's bank, and he spent a long time studying the ground, without moving into the open or revealing himself to the island, trying to decide whether the horseman had gone directly into the water. It was possible that there were high ridges of shells on the bottom of the bayou that could form trails out to that island.

At last, unable to follow the sign into the water, he tied his horse to a cypress and began a careful search up and down the banks for a boat, or signs of one. By nightfall, he had not come across any. The best he could do was a post oak that had been swept over by the wind to lie with its head in the water, its roots partially torn from the earth. He dug these roots out and finally got the tree shoved off into the water. He took off his boots and used the chin string of his Stetson to tie them together. It was long enough so he could hang them around his neck to dangle down in front of him on either side.

At last he rolled up his pants, and waded out to climb aboard the oak. It pitched and rolled with his weight, but retained enough spreading branches and rotting foliage to balance the trunk. He bowed forward, and began paddling with his hands.

Finally the oaks of the island lifted their twisted silhouettes up before him,

and his tree ground against the shells. He pulled his boots on before going ashore, and then stepped off. He could not help the crunching of his feet in the deep layer of crushed shells. In a few yards, he reached the topsoil that had been blown in to cover the shells, and then he was within the stunted timber.

Once in the trees, he moved more cautiously, until he at last reached the clearing. The moon was rising, and its diffused light revealed the legendary stone building, and the sand banked like snowdrifts against its crumbling walls. He stood behind the damp trunk of a post oak, studying the structure.

It was not large, perhaps forty feet by twenty, built like a blockhouse, with no windows in evidence. The heavy wooden door was still on its hinges, swung open. There was a hide lying across the threshold. It was stiff and old. There were no recent signs near the door, either. The only prints were those embedded in the earth, as if a man had stepped through the door while the ground was still wet. But grass grew in these.

Blacklaws got his Remington from its holster and made a careful circle of the building, through the trees, without finding anything, or any sign. At last, after a half hour of this, he took one step into the open, and then wheeled and stepped back to cover. Nothing happened. He stepped out again, this time to cross the open space and stand up against the wall of the building. There were no sounds from within.

At last he moved around to the door, listening again. There was not enough room in this building to do butchering and pickling in any great numbers. If it was a store room, however, he wanted to know. The door was of heavy oak, with a rusty latch. It was only half open and he had to shove it a little to step through. He caught the musty scent of more hides.

He risked a match, at last, holding its light cupped in his hands. This vague illumination revealed the room he stood in to be empty except for a wrecked tier of bunks at one side. Pools of moss-edged water covered the cement floor, and spiders scurried from the light. A doorway stood at one end. He walked to this. The portal had fallen from its hinges, and he walked across the rotting boards. It was a smaller, square room. The hides were stacked over to one side. There were only a half a dozen, as old and briny as the one outside.

The match burned his fingers. He dropped it and ground it out beneath his heel, turning slowly with the sensation of something wrong. He stepped back through the door, walked across the front room, was nearly at this door when there came a grunting sound from outside.

He had no clear idea, in that first instant, of what came through the front door. It charged in with a coughing rush, knocking into him so hard he had to stumble backward to keep from falling. Then his foot caught on the rough cement floor and he was thrown anyway. There was a thudding crash. The dim moonlight was shut off, leaving blackness thick as soot.

At the same time, a coughing shape crossed above him. Something smashed at his ribs with the beat of a triphammer. Blacklaws fired upward. Then his hand was knocked aside by a second grunting creature that plunged across him.

He rolled over, dazed and shaken. He gained his feet, staggering for the

door. Reaching it, he pawed for the handle. He could not find one.

Blacklaws faced about, putting his back flat against the door. He knew what had happened now. He was locked inside this building with a pair of wild hogs.

He listened to their chesty grunts, the crackle of their sharp hoofs against cement floor. He tried to block his breath off, knowing the slightest sound might betray him. But the struggle had been too violent, and his chest was heaving.

The hogs were rooting around through the pools of water across the chamber. One of them ceased its aimless sounds, and gave a loud roar. There was that deadly rattle of hoofs.

Blacklaws tried to calculate where it was. He waited till the last instant. Then he fired, jumping aside. The first one smashed into the wall, squealing with pain. But the second one was right behind. It came heavily against Blacklaws and knocked him back against the first floundering razorback.

There was a grunt, a flashing pain in his hand. He no longer held the gun. Hand wet with blood, he threw himself out from them. He stumbled and almost fell, and then plunged heavily against the cement of the opposite wall.

But they had wheeled and followed. Again that clatter of hoofs. That grunting roar. He jumped aside, running hard for another wall. He threw himself against this and heard them turn and come after him. He broke back for the wall on the door side. He reached the spot where he had dropped the gun and chanced one instant of going to his knee and pawing about the floor. But he could not find it.

Blacklaws jumped up with a hog coming in from behind. It went past his left with a rush. But the other one caught him going by his right. Its scaly flank knocked him back onto his knees.

Blacklaws was shocked at what an effort it caused him to rise again. He staggered blindly through the darkness to a wall, sagging against it.

He did not know if he had hit either of them when he fired. They were circling across the room. One sounded as if it was coughing in pain.

Then they seemed to be trotting back this way. One of them gave a triumphant roar and broke toward him. Blacklaws jumped out of the way. But the second hog caught him across the thigh. There was a blow—pain—his feet were carried from the ground with the upward toss of the razorback's head.

He struck the floor, rolled over and over. Coming to a stop in water, he rose, dizzy with pain. There seemed to be walls on either side. And wood.

He was in that doorway to the smaller chamber, crouching on the fallen portal. The hogs began at his back again, squealing in their rage. Blacklaws scrambled across the fallen door, going until he came against the wall.

Here he sagged, on his knees, drained by the violence of the last few minutes. Fresh noises from the other room spun him about. He lost his balance and sprawled across something stiff and hairy. The cowhides in the corner.

He pawed for a handhold, lifting one up. The hogs must have been nosing along the trail of his blood, for they came at a trot.

Holding the iron-tough hide before him, Blacklaws dragged himself up against the wall. The hogs halted a moment in the doorway, tusks clashing against each other. With a shrill squeal, the first one rushed.

Blacklaws waited till the last instant. Then he jumped aside, holding the hide out like a bullfighter. The hog went into it with a ripping thump. The other animal was right behind, crashing against Blacklaws. He lost his balance and pitched over its body.

He rolled over and came onto his hands and knees atop the fallen door. Both hogs wheeled and charged after him. He could hear the bump and clatter of the hide, still hooked onto one razorback's tusk.

Blacklaws plunged through the door, throwing himself aside into the outer room. But the one without the hide sensed this and wheeled after him as it came out the door. It knocked him against the wall. He rolled over and over down the wall to escape its follow-up.

He hit the corner and ran down the other wall until he reached the door again. He could hear that hog out in the middle of the bigger room, bumping and clattering around as it tried to get the hide off its tusk. Blacklaws staggered through the door into the small room and went to his knees at the wall, pawing for another hide.

He got it, and was hardly able to rise again. He knew he could not last much longer. The second hog came in through the door after him.

Again Blacklaws tried to jump aside with the hide out at his flank. But the hog went against it without hooking a tusk. It whirled with a wild squeal, came into him with all its weight. There was a sharp rip as one of those tusks went through the hide. It was his thigh that got the point. Blacklaws shouted with the pain. But the hide had kept it from going deep. He pulled free, and did not wait for the hog to wrench the hide from his hand.

He jumped over the flapping hide, pawing for the hog. He found a leg, grasped it, pulling the hog off its feet. The beast squealed wildly, still hooked onto that hide. Sharp hoofs sliced at Blacklaws's arms, his belly. He clung to the leg, keeping the beast on its flank, stamping at its head, its ribs, its chest. He kicked savagely, grunting every time he found his mark, till the sounds of the man and beast were indistinguishable.

The hog fought viciously, squealing and coughing. But Blacklaws hung onto the leg, kicking, stamping, till it was the one thing left in his mind. He did not know how long it lasted. He got on his feet and stamped downward. There was the crack of bones and a squeal of pain. Then the hog threw him and he lay on his side kicking at it. Blacklaws refused to give up that grip on its leg, and rolled over to his knees and came up and began stamping downward again. The hog's struggle threw him again and he did not have the strength to rise. All he could do was hang onto that leg.

But the hog's efforts were feeble too, now. Its leg twitched weakly in his hands. Its sounds were shallow and pain-ridden. Blacklaws let go and crawled away on his belly until he was against the wall. He could not move any farther. He was drained of vitality and of will. But the hog did not move. Its grunts died down. Dimly, Blacklaws tried to hear the other hog. But there was no sound in the next room. He finally realized that was the hog he had hit with his shots, and they had finally killed it.

He was still lying there, half-conscious, when there was a noise outside. The door opened. He could not react in any way. He could not move. He

simply lay there, staring at the moonlit rectangle of the open door. Then the silhouette of a man moved into it.

Chapter Ten

"Big Card-Game Fight"

QUINTIN GARLAND reined his copperbottom against Phil's nag to grab the boy's arm.

"How much farther now, Phil? We must be nearly to the coast. Seems like we've been riding all night."

Phil lay forward across the saddle horn, barely able to hold himself on the horse. His head rolled upward with great effort. His face had a sallow hue in this darkness, and he had trouble focusing his glazed eyes. Garland felt a frustrated anger as he saw the delirium in them. The boy had been unconscious all that first night, in the cabin, and then delirious the next day and night. Garland had been unable to get anything coherent from him till the second morning, when Phil seemed to be somewhat lucid, and had started giving directions. They had been traveling since noon, now, forced to stop once for three hours when Phil passed out. Garland shook him again.

"Phil?"

"This is the fork," mumbled Phil. "Take the one on the right, Dee."

"It isn't Dee, you fool—" Garland broke off impatiently, gigging his horse forward, taking the turn-off. It was a narrower trail, overgrown with bindweed, showing little use. This puzzled Garland. It should show a lot of use. They couldn't drag that many hides in here without—

They broke suddenly into a clearing on a bank of the bayou. There was a shack here, built of mud-blackened cypress logs, its saddle roof sagging in the middle.

Garland wheeled to the boy. "Where are we?"

"Mock's," said Phil weakly.

"Mock's! Phil, what did you bring us here for? This isn't the place. You know that—"

"I can't go any farther. Please . . ."

Phil's voice faded out and he slacked off to slide softly from his horse to the ground. Garland dismounted and walked around to where Phil lay, dropping on one knee beside him.

"Damn you, Phil. You know I didn't mean here. You never meant to keep your word—"

Garland broke off sharply. Perhaps some lifting movement of his horse's head had warned him. He turned to see a man standing at the corner of the shack, a dim silhouette in the fog, slop-gutted and bowlegged. It was Mock Fannin. He came over to them without speaking and hunkered down beside Garland, staring at Phil.

"Phil's been shot. What the hell did you bring him clear out here for?" Mock broke off, to look up at Garland. "What kind of trouble's he in?" he asked, at last.

"I don't know," Garland said. "He just came to my place and asked for help. I figured the first place they'd look for him was his house."

Mock slipped his hands under Phil's arms. "Get his feet. Help me in with him."

Reluctantly, Garland went to Phil's feet. The boy was dead weight, and a great labor to get in the shack. There was only one large room, stinking of fried fish and cheap whisky. The hog-fat candle flickering on the table cast

an uncertain light out into the chamber. It was not till Garland had lowered Phil into the bunk which Mock indicated, and straightened up, that he saw the man in the other bunk. The name left him in a surprised whisper.

"Kenny."

Blacklaws rolled up onto one elbow, staring silently at Garland. The blanket covered him to the knees. Below this the legs of his pants were ripped and torn and grimed with a white substance that gleamed like brine in the light, except at the edges of each tear, where a crust of dried blood made a coppery stain. Garland moved forward.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Big card game," Mock said. "Big card-game fight. Kenny killed seventeen men."

"That white stuff looks like you've been on the shell-islands," said Garland.

"Does it?" asked Blacklaws.

Garland's hands flattened out on the table top. "How did you get so ripped up?"

"Big knife fight," Mock said.

"Looks more like you got in a nest of wild hogs," Garland said, bending forward intensely. "Is that what happened, Kenny? Did some hogs attack you?"

"Card game. Seventeen men."

"Shut up, Mock," snapped Garland. Tate had tried to kill Blacklaws. That was obvious. How else would Blacklaws get mixed up with hogs? But somehow that wasn't the question in Garland's mind.

"We passed a lot of shell-islands coming in," he said. "We even saw *Cheniere Dominique*. It was the only one big enough for something like this to happen. What were you doing on *Cheniere Dominique*, Kenny?"

"Take it easy, Quintin," Mock said. "Kenny's a sick man."

But Garland found himself staring fixedly at Blacklaws. How had Tate lured Blacklaws to the island? Only one thing big enough to decoy him out here. The hide factory. Tate had been right. Blacklaws was working for Carew.

"Kenny—" Garland's lips shaped the words stiffly— "what were you doing on *Cheniere Dominique?*"

"Just riding, Quintin."

Garland could not keep from swinging his glance around to Mock. There was a sly knowledge in the man's dissolute eyes.

"Didn't know Dominique's island meant that much to you, Quintin," he grinned blandly.

Garland felt his weight settle. What a fool he was! Why had he let them see how much that meant to him? Why did he always lose his head where Blacklaws was concerned?

Still grinning, Mock began unwinding the blood-soaked bandage Garland had put on Phil's wound. He stopped, halfway through, raising his head. Garland heard it then. The soft slap-slap of a paddle out in the bayou. Mock shuffled to the candle and snuffed it out. In the darkness, Garland heard the man move to the door and open it. The catwalk of split Davy Crockett logs ran down across the rotten bottom mud to a makeshift jetty of post-oak stumps and the sideboards and strakes of an old skiff. There were two pirogues drawn up against this jetty.

The third pirogue seemed to swim out of the mist, coming toward the jetty. A ghostly craft, at first, with two tenebrous figures in it. Garland was at the door by the time the pirogue thudded softly into the jetty. One of the figures swung out onto the platform in a catlike movement, to help

the other out. The catwalk swayed and clattered with their movement toward the shack. They seemed to float in out of the fog. The height, the immense shoulders of the taller figure stamped it as Rouquette. The other looked like a woman in some kind of heavy cloak.

"I don't see a light," she said.

"I'm here, Corsica," Mock said. "Just snuffed out the candle."

"Mock." It came in a little gasp. "You startled me."

"I'll light up," Mock answered.

Garland stepped aside as the man turned for the table. Corsica and the giant *Os Rouge* waited till the candlelight spread out from the table, lapping at their feet. Surprise parted Corsica's lips, with her first sight of Garland.

"Quintin, what are you doing here?"

"I might ask you the same thing."

"You're not in court now, can't you answer a simple question?" she said impatiently. "I'm looking for Phil. He's been gone three days now. I made Rouquette bring me down here. I thought Mock might know something."

"You'd better come in, Corsica."

The strange tone of Mock's voice lifted her chin. Then she came in past Garland, with Rouquette moving behind, and halted sharply. The shadows obscured Blacklaws, as they had when Garland first came in, and Corsica had seen Phil first. She rushed over to drop on her knees beside him.

"What is it? He's shot? What is it, Mock?"

"Garland can tell you," Mock said.

She wheeled, still on her knees. Before she could speak to Garland, however, the corner of her vision picked up the dim figure in the other bunk.

"Kenny."

It was hardly a whisper from her. He lay on his side, staring at her, without offering to speak. His pants were still visible below the blanket, covered with that white residue of crushed shells and that copper-black stain about the long rips. A scar lay like an ugly stripe down the length of one cheek.

"Looks like the hogs have been at that one, Miss Corsica," grinned Rouquette.

"Hogs? Where?"

"*Cheniere Dominique*." It left Garland in a bitter accusation, before he could stop himself, and afterward he was sorry. Corsica sent him a sharply puzzled glance, speaking to Blacklaws.

"Phil was there with you?"

"No," Blacklaws said wearily. "Phil wasn't there."

Still on her knees, she turned back to her brother, fright shining in her eyes. "Then what—"

"It won't be fatal, Corsica," said Mock. "It's swollen, and he has fever, but I think he'll be all right."

She stared at Phil a moment longer, biting her underlip. Then she swung wide and luminous eyes up to Garland.

"Phil came to my place this way," he said. "In some kind of trouble."

"*Your* place." Corsica was incredulous. "And you brought him way down here—in this shape."

"I thought it would be dangerous to take him home."

"Dangerous? As dangerous as bringing him down here? Through the night, the rain—"

"Now, don't go misjudging Garland," Mock told her. "It was purely out of the goodness of his heart."

She continued to stare up at Garland. "What did you hope to gain by bringing him down here, Quintin?"

"Gain." He felt the heated flush rise

in his face. "I stood to gain nothing, Corsica. In fact, I stood to lose everything, if it were found out I aided a criminal to escape. I probably saved your brother's life, and you accuse me of doing it for some kind of selfish purpose."

There was a silence. Corsica's face had sharpened under the sting of Garland's words, and there was a relenting in her eyes. Then Mock chuckled.

"Garland was mighty curious about why Kenny was on *Cheniere Dominique*," he said. "Do you really think there's a hide factory on that island, Rouquette?"

Surprise robbed Rouquette's gleaming face of that broad smile, but before he could answer, Corsica glanced swiftly at Mock. "Hide factory? Why should there be a—" She broke off, looking back at Garland. "Is that what kind of trouble Phil was in? Had he been rustling some hides?"

"How do I know?" asked Garland.

"I think you do." That relenting was gone from her face. "You thought Phil had been rustling hides, you thought he knew where the hidden packery is. Is that what Mock meant? You want to know where the packery is too? You deliberately used Phil's condition to force it from him. You made him bring you all the way out here, in that shape—" She turned away, her hands clenched at her sides.

"Corsica—"

"Don't speak to me, Quintin." Corsica turned to Mock, speaking in a brittle voice. "I'm staying here with Phil."

"You'd better not, Corsica," Mock told her. "The sheriff will be coming around to your place. I'm surprised he hasn't come already. If you're gone when he does come, it will really put a bee in his bonnet."

She shook her head from side to side, frowning. "Then, we can take Phil back now."

"You know you can't. He's already had too much punishment."

She stood there for a long moment, staring at Mock. Garland saw defeat settle into her face. She turned back to her brother. "Phil," she said in a small voice. "Why—" She broke off helplessly. She turned to look at Blacklaws.

"Kenny'll be all right too, Corsica," grinned Mock. "You just leave it up to old Doc Fannin."

"Will you need anything?" she asked dully.

"Whisky." Mock licked his lips. "Lots of that. Big medicinal value—cure anything. Clean clothes for both of them. Coffee, if you can get it."

She nodded dumbly, still staring at Blacklaws. She held out her hand, a deep compassion in her parted lips.

"Kenny," she said.

His answer was barely audible. "What?"

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

Mock shuffled forward, taking her arm. "Come on, now. The quicker you get back the better. They'll be all right—"

She turned her eyes to Garland for an instant as she passed. They flashed like a naked blade in the light. Then that was gone, and she was by. Mock dropped her arm when she reached the door, and she stepped outside alone. Rouquette started to follow, but Mock caught his arm. Garland saw his chance and went by them after Corsica. He caught up with her halfway down the plank walk.

"Corsica," he said. "You can't think I'd be capable of—"

"I don't know what you'd be capa-

ble of, Quintin," she said. "A month ago, two months, I would have thought you were doing it for Phil's sake. Now—"

"Blacklaws put this in your mind. Mock and Blacklaws. You can't believe their insidious—"

"No, Quintin," she said tiredly. "Whatever there is in my mind was put there by what you did, not by what they said. Now let me go. I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"Corsica—"

"Let me go," she said sharply, and tore loose to wheel and half run on down the puncheon walk. Then the walk began to shake with a heavier weight, and Garland turned barely in time to allow Rouquette by.

Garland watched him help Corsica into the pirogue and get in himself, turning the boat out into the fog. Then Garland went back up the catwalk. There was something goading about Mock Fannin's primitive silhouette in the doorway. Without speaking to him, Garland left the catwalk and went to his horse. He mounted absently and took up the lead rope of the other animal, gigging his horse out onto the trail.

Somehow the only thing in his mind was Blacklaws. Garland's whole defeat here seemed to revolve around the man. It had started when Garland revealed how much he wanted to know what Blacklaws was doing on *Cheniere Dominique*. He wouldn't have given himself away but for Blacklaws. And Mock wouldn't have guessed his desire to know where the hidden packery was, wouldn't have tied it up to Phil and put it in Corsica's mind that Garland had used Phil for the same reasons.

Everything was because of Blacklaws. And that expression on her face when she had taken that last look at the man. Garland hadn't missed it. Was Kenny coming between them that way too?

Garland felt a hate so strong it almost gagged him. He couldn't let Blacklaws do that. And the packery. He couldn't let Blacklaws find the packery before he did. It would ruin everything.

The idea forming in Garland's mind was not completely new. He had considered getting Blacklaws out of the way before. But he had never actually considered doing it himself.

Chapter Eleven

Inquisition

AFTER they had left, Blacklaws lay moveless in the bunk. He was still too sick, too weak from his battle to think very clearly. He was hot from the fever; the wounds Mock had treated and bound up throbbed insistently. He tossed feebly.

"Sure held supper up," muttered Mock, shuffling around the room. "Soon's I fix Phil I'll get us some food. How about some bowfin tonight, Kenny?" He glanced over at Blacklaws, and grinned. "Don't look like that. They're good as catfish if you cook them right. Most people make it taste like wet cotton. Got to soak it overnight in vinegar and oil. Better'n chicken."

He was hunting through a shelf for some clean cloth for Phil's bandage. "Funny thing about those bowfin. The way their swim bladder's put in they can breathe air and live in mud. I've

seen them plowed alive out of a field weeks after high water's backed down. The one I got here, now. Had to climb a tree for him. Last flood must have left him there. He'd built himself a nest and started laying woodpecker eggs."

Blacklaws did not answer, and Mock puttered around making a poultice of lard and gunpowder for Phil's wounds. It was an old remedy, and it drew like fire, but Blacklaws had seen it work wonders with an infected wound.

"See them seventeen new locks on the door?" Mock asked.

Blacklaws's eyes swung to the door. Then they closed, as he realized what Mock meant.

"If you're talking about that latch on the door at *Cheniere Dominique*, it wasn't new," Blacklaws said.

"I thought it was funny there should be locks on the door," Mock said. "Last time I was there it didn't have any. I scraped at one. Things rust pretty fast out here, Kenny. It was nice and shiny and new underneath, though."

"So Tate put an iron latch on the door," Blacklaws said dully.

"Where do you suppose he'd get seventeen locks, Kenny?"

"Deller's store, I suppose. Only place around here."

"Tate wouldn't have money for it. He's never had a cent."

"Maybe he traded Deller a shoat for it."

"Deller won't deal with him. Tate's tried it before."

"You're thinking somebody else got it for Tate?" asked Blacklaws. When Mock did not answer, Blacklaws turned to see him grinning slyly. Blacklaws tossed restlessly. "Maybe you're on the wrong track, Mock. I checked for fresh sign before I went in that powderhouse. The place hadn't been entered in months—"

Mock was opening cartridges and emptying the black powder into a plate. He began to mix lard with this.

"Tate could drive a herd of cattle through your front yard and never leave a trace," he murmured.

"You haven't told me how you got on *Cheniere Dominique*," Blacklaws said.

"I was fishing near the island," Mock told him. "Heard the shot. It must have been the one you let go before Tate slammed the door. I went in to have a look-see." He raised his eyes. "So you checked for fresh sign. Like you always do, Kenny? Or was it something special?"

Blacklaws licked dry lips. "Corsica came to me yesterday about Phil. He'd been gone a day then. The least I could do was take a look. I found sign of the hide rustlers, found where one man had broken away. Cold trail, but it led me down into Congo Bog."

"You figure Tate planted the whole thing?"

"No. I think one of the rustlers really did turn off, and got as far south as Bayou Lafitte. He went into the bayou just north of Congo Bog. It looked like he forded and came out on the other side. The prints looked the same, and were sure enough a couple of days old."

"You think Tate took it up there?" asked Mock.

"I think the rustler stayed in the water, turning upstream or down to hide his tracks. Tate made the tracks on the other side, so it looked like the man I'd trailed came out on the opposite bank and went on into Congo Bog."

"How could Tate shave it so close?" asked Mock. "Surely, he'd know you

could tell the difference between the two sets of tracks."

"That's the point. There wasn't a difference. The only way he could have done that was to know who the rustler was and steal his horse for that night."

Mock shook his head, snorting. "I wouldn't put it beyond that crazy hog-toler. Then you figure Tate waited on the island for you?"

"Or on the bank, and pushed off in a boat with those hogs after he saw me go across," Blacklaws said.

"But how would he know you'd be trailing that hide rustler in the first place?" Mock said.

"Probably knew Phil was in trouble and that I'd be hunting him," Blacklaws said.

Mock looked up from kneading the poultice. "Or knew you was hunting the hidden packery, and could be led onto *Cheniere Dominique* if you thought the packery was there?"

The silence after that seemed to press heavily against Blacklaws's chest till he found it difficult to breathe.

"Is that what you think, Mock?" he said, at last.

Mock dropped his eyes uncomfortably to the table. "Why not look square at it, Kenny? What do you think?"

Blacklaws rolled his head restlessly. "I guess you know."

"You was wondering whether Phil brought Garland here just because I was a cousin of the Manattes, or because I was in the hide-rustling with him."

Blacklaws stared at the ceiling, without answering. Mock looked down at his glistening hands.

"Sometimes I wish you hadn't come back, Kenny," he said.

Blacklaws had nightmares later on. Nightmares of giant hogs swarming all over him, their mouths gaping, their tusks setting up an unholy clatter. He did not know how many times he awoke with Mock holding him down and trying to soothe him. The fever was still with him the second day, and he lay in a semi-stupor, perspiring heavily with pain and weakness.

Phil was more violent, thrashing about wildly and calling Corsica or babbling about Garland. He quieted in the afternoon, however, and Mock asked Blacklaws if it would be all right to leave them alone an hour or so, he had to go fishing if they were to have anything for supper. Blacklaws told him to go ahead.

Afternoon waned slowly, with the sun coming around and shining obliquely through the doorway, adding its brazen heat to the suffocating humidity already filling the shack. Blacklaws threw off the cover, drenching the straw tick with his sweat.

"Garland, that's a damn-fool idea, you'll never get anywhere with that—"

Phil screamed it like a woman in pain, and began thrashing in his bunk again. It lifted Blacklaws up in startled surprise. The pains of his wounds caught him and he sagged back. But Phil continued to thrash around so wildly that Blacklaws was afraid he would throw himself out.

Blacklaws got his feet swung to the floor and almost pitched over on his face when he tried to rise. He went to his hands and knees. Halfway across the room everything started spinning,

and he clutched at a chair to keep himself from toppling over. Phil was still screaming and laughing, and Blacklaws forced himself to crawl on across the floor. He reached the bunk on hands and knees.

"Take it easy, Phil," he gasped. "You're not with Garland now. You're at Mock's, you're safe."

"Garland," Phil heaved up, laughing wildly again. "Brand them through a blanket, Quintin? You're crazy."

Blacklaws stopped trying to calm him, frowning. "Who brands through a blanket?"

"Everybody," raved Phil. "If you do the whole thing through a wet blanket and run your iron over the old scars too it'll make them look fresh as the new ones. I seen a man do it once, fresh as the new ones. You're crazy, Quintin, you'll never get that on Roman. I've been down to his place when he's skinning, only brand that shows through to the inside is his Double Sickle—"

"Phil—" Blacklaws caught at him. "What if something else did burn through?"

"Roman wouldn't be that big a fool." Phil thrashed over against the wall. "Even in the early days he wouldn't. It'd be too obvious how they changed a Quarter Moon to a Double Sickle—"

"Take it easy, Phil, lie down and relax, Garland's gone," Blacklaws said. He rubbed his hand up and down Phil's arm and went on talking to him in a crooning voice. Finally Phil lay back and gave up, and fell into a fretting sleep.

But now Blacklaws was putting it together and realizing what it meant. Roman had grown big fast during the war. There had always been vague rumors that he was not above rustling. But there had never been proof, and the stories were usually circulated by his enemies. The wet-blanket technique had been popular at that time, tracing a new brand over an old one through the blanket so that the old scars looked as fresh as the new. But sometimes the first brand had been put on a thin patch of hide, and had burned to the inside, whereas the mark made through the blanket might not burn clear through the hide. That left the original brand showing on the inside of the hide. A cow had to be skinned to prove it. But they were skinning them by the thousands now.

So that's what Garland's found, Blacklaws thought. *He's come across a hide somewhere that proves Roman was a wet-blanket artist. Phil said the Quarter Moon? It would have to be an old steer. The Quarter Moon went out of business ten years ago. An old steer with the Double Sickle put on over the original Quarter Moon, but with that Quarter Moon showing up on the inside of the hide. It's good, Quintin,* he thought. *It's good.*

And what could that mean to Roman? It would be positive proof of his earlier rustling. The other members of the Jefferson Association wouldn't stand for it. He'd be ruined, if not jailed. Roman wouldn't touch the hide rustlers if they held that over his head.

Blacklaws raised his eyes as the catwalk began shaking outside. Mock came in, breathing heavily.

"Phil got delirious again," Blacklaws told him.

Mock did not seem to hear that. "Listen," he said, "the sheriff's right on the edge of Congo Bog with the whole Seventeenth Cavalry. I saw him. They're headed in here. I think I'd better get Phil someplace. Think you can manage

it alone for a day?"

"I'll be all right. Where will you take him?"

"Back to the Manatte place is the only thing I know. I don't think anybody in town knows about that old storm cellar where the slave cabins used to be."

"I wish I could help you get him out."

"You'd better stay here," Mock said. "They aren't after you." He helped Blacklaws back to his bunk. Then he pulled his Thuers conversion from its holster, handing it to him. "This is the best I can do, Kenny. I'll stop at *Cheniere Dominique* on my way back and try to pick up your horse and your gun."

Blacklaws checked the loads on the six-shooter, slid it under his pillow. "Thanks, Mock," he said.

Mock got some blankets wrapped around Phil and then bent to help him out of the bunk. Phil began thrashing, but Mock finally got him on his feet. They staggered out of the shack like a pair of drunks. They almost spilled off the catwalk several times before they reached the boat. It was a battle to get Phil in the pirogue. Mock straightened up then, turning to look back through the open door.

"Warbag all laced up, Kenny?"

"All laced up, Mock."

Mock turned to drop in the pirogue and shove off. The narrow boat disappeared around a shaggy turn, and Blacklaws lowered his head back onto the pillow, turning it so he could still see through the door. The sun was low in the west, sending a flood of crimson light directly in the open door. All the late-afternoon sounds were drowsy and muffled. The raucous call of mallards. The cackling of turkeys in some distant bottom.

The warmth and the peace of it made Blacklaws realize that spring was not far off. It filled him with a sense of well-being despite the dull throbbing of his wounds, and presently he went to sleep.

When he awoke the sun was gone. Twilight saturated the land with a copper stain. A wind had risen, whipping the bayou into choppy cross-currents. Blacklaws felt cold, and rolled over. A wave of nausea swept him and he hung his head over the side, waiting for that to pass. When he finally raised his head again, Gauche Sallier stood in the doorway.

The two of them stared at each other without speaking for what seemed a long time. Finally, though the Creole was in silhouette, his teeth made a chalky flash against the dark enigma of his face.

"Good evening, *M'sieu*."

"You looking for Mock?" Blacklaws asked.

"Are you sick, *M'sieu?*"

"No."

Sallier came through the door. Agate Ayers appeared behind him, and came in too. He looked at Blacklaws's torn clothes.

"Looks like you've been in a fight," he said.

"What's on your mind?" Blacklaws asked.

"Phil Manatte."

"I don't know where he is."

"He isn't home, for sure," Agate said. "The sheriff was there today."

"What are you hunting him for?"

"Sheriff Sheridan would like him."

"Are you with the sheriff?"

"You don't know where Phil is?"

"I told you."

"You look bad off," Agate said.

"Not bad."

"Can you get up?"

"If I want."

"Can you now?" Sallier caught up one of the hide-bottomed chairs from the table, swinging it around beside the bunk and lowering himself in it. Then he leaned forward and lifted his hand. Blacklaws could not stop the stiffening of his body. Sallier pointed to the wound on Blacklaws's arm.

"Is that the worst one?" he asked.

"None of them are bad."

"*Non?*" Sallier put his hand against Blacklaws's bandaged stomach and pushed. Blacklaws could not help the hoarse grunt of pain that left him. He lunged back against the wall to escape the pressure.

"Ain't that a sack of hell?" said Agate.

"I want to know where Phil Manatte is, *M'sieu.*"

"I don't know, I told you—"

"Don't you?"

Sallier reached out again. Blacklaws grabbed his hand. Sallier put pressure on. Blacklaws was too weak to keep the hand from moving in. He released Sallier and lunged for the Thuers. He got the pillow torn off and the gun in his hand before Agate reached him. The man caught his wrist and swept his hand against the wall so hard the gun leaped out of his fingers and off the edge of the bed onto the floor. Agate scooped it off the floor and put it on the table.

"I thought so," he said. "Now ask him where Phil is."

Blacklaws lay huddled over on his side, eyes squinted with the pain of his smashed hand. "I don't know," he said.

"He seems very weak, Agate. Perhaps you can hold him."

Agate came around the chair and bent into the bunk. Blacklaws tried to fend him off. Agate caught one of his wrists and gave a heave that pulled Blacklaws flat on his belly. Agate caught the other wrist and twisted Blacklaws over onto his back. Then he pinned both wrists against the sweat-drenched tick. Blacklaws writhed feebly for a moment. Then he stopped. The Creole was looking at his leg.

"This one looks even worse than the stomach, Agate."

"Try it."

Sallier reached down to spread the torn edges of cloth carefully apart. He probed through the bandage with his forefinger. He found the hole and dug deep. The breath came out of Blacklaws in a hoarse gust.

"Where is Phil, *M'sieu?*"

"I don't know."

"Dig deeper, Gauche."

"Where is Phil, *M'sieu?*"

"Damn you, I don't know, I told you."

"Where is Phil?"

"God damn you, Sallier."

"Where, *M'sieu?*"

Suddenly a roar broke through all the shouting and thrashing. Sallier's hand was torn away from Blacklaws's leg. Blacklaws opened his eyes to see John Roman dragging the chair backward with Sallier still in it. It upset as it smashed into the table and spilled the Creole out onto the floor. At the same time Agate released Blacklaws's wrists and wheeled toward Roman. But he was too late.

Letting go of the chair, Roman reached Agate before he could move, smashing him brutally in the face. It knocked him back into the wall so hard the whole building shook. Sallier was rolling over and going for his gun.

Roman jumped back at him and kicked it out of his hand. Then he kicked him in the face, knocking him back under the table. After that Roman stood panting in the middle of the room.

"Of all the damn snakes I ever saw," he said. "I ought to skin you and render your lard like a steer. Don't have enough guts to stand up against a whole man, two of you on one at that—"

He trailed off into a raging wheeze. Agate stood pinned against the wall, gaping at him. There was more anger in Sallier as he crawled from beneath the table, holding his bloody face. He got to his feet and stood there, trembling.

"You told us to find out where Phil was."

"Not that way," Roman told him. "Not torturin' a sick man. I ought to kick your face in again." He turned and stepped over to Blacklaws. "What'd they do, Kenny?"

Blacklaws lay heavily in the bed, the feebly held pain drawing his cheeks in till the blunt edges of his strong cheekbones shone dully through the flesh. "No permanent damage, Roman." Suddenly his lips spread in a weak grin. "You're getting soft," he said.

Roman snorted. "Don't make that mistake, Kenny. If I wanted anything from you when you were healthy, I'd gladly beat it out myself. But nobody'll ever say John Roman kicked a man while he was down." He half-turned to Agate. "I've got a pint of whisky in my soogan. Get it for me." Then he wheeled on around to wave an arm at the Creole. "You get out too, you damn snake, get out and wait for me."

Sallier had wiped his face clean of blood with his neckerchief. He went over to pick his gun up off the floor and stood there holding it a minute, eyes smoldering. Roman faced him without a sound. Agate passed across the front of Sallier and out the door.

Finally Sallier said, "Someday, John, somebody is going to kill you."

"He'll have to have more guts than you," Roman said. "Put that gun away and get out."

Sallier continued to stare at him. Finally he put the gun back, and turned to walk out the door. Roman turned to Blacklaws.

"They thought you knew where Phil was?" he asked.

"What made you think Phil would be here?" Blacklaws said.

"He ain't at home. Mock's the next bet." Roman bent toward Blacklaws. "Do you know where he is, Kenny?"

"No."

Agate came in with the whisky. Roman went to the shelves and got a tin cup. Then he poured half a cupful for Blacklaws and held his head up for a drink. Blacklaws squinted his eyes shut, as the raw fire of it spread out through him, and then lay back, licking his lips.

"What put you in this fix?" Roman asked, at last.

Blacklaws did not answer at first. Then a smile fluttered one end of his mouth, and died away. "Big card game," he said soberly. "Big card-game fight. I killed seventeen men."

Roman frowned sharply, started to speak, then checked himself. Finally he dismissed it with an angry snort.

"I'll leave the bottle here where you can get it," he said.

"Should I thank you?"

"I'll take it out of your hide when you're well."

Blacklaws's eyes were still closed, but he was grinning again. "That's what I like to hear, John," he said.

He heard Agate go out again, heard the puncheon flooring tremble beneath Roman's weight. Blacklaws lifted his lids to see Roman standing in the doorway. He had turned to look back at Blacklaws, his chin sunk deeply into his neck.

"Wipe the smile off," he said. "You won't have any reason for it the next time we meet."

Chapter Twelve

The Trap

SPRING was bursting the land now. Huisache was a prodigal Midas flinging its golden bloom through the thicket. The fresh-fallen snowdrifts of daisies lined the roads and the tufted tips of buffalo clover bobbed on windy ridges like a host of cottontails.

But Quintin Garland felt none of the rebirth swelling at the land. He spent most of his time in the office now, on the second floor of the French House. He had few clients left, and nobody had been to see him during the ten days since he had taken Phil to Mock's. That did not bother him so much as the fact that the rustlers had still not gotten in touch with him. Surely the word of his offer had reached them by now. If Tate had not carried it, one of the other brushpoppers he had told would sooner or later get it through. It was his last chance. There was money in what they were doing. There would be more money in it, with what he had to hold over Roman's head. He could smash Roman with it, and that would be tantamount to smashing the Jefferson Cattleman's Association itself, for Roman was the only man who really held it together.

Perhaps Garland could have ruined Roman as completely by turning his evidence of Roman's earlier rustling over to the law. But that would profit him little. It might gain him some small recognition, might restore the faith of the town in him. Yet what could that lead too? Nothing but the resumption of the same stupid, penny-pinching routine of being a small-town lawyer. That was not for him. He had seen too many men waste their lives struggling to rise that way.

He had never stopped to analyze or question the ambition which gnawed at him so insistently. He never regretted this desire to achieve. Without ambition what was a man? A drunken brushpopper like Mock, living on the level of some animal. Or a defeated farmer like King Wallace, bent and broken by back-breaking labor in fields that would never make him more than starving white trash.

It was an old thought-pattern for Garland. He rose from his desk, unable to remain still with the restlessness of it. He opened a window, squinting against the afternoon brightness to look down the river road toward the Manatte plantation.

He had tried to see Corsica several times since they had met at Mock's, ten days ago, but Dee had always met him on the porch and told him Corsica was upstairs. That filled Garland with a bitter anger. She'd come down well enough when this was finished.

Movement in the street below took up his attention. Harry Sharp was riding in from the west, impeccably tailored as ever in his dove-gray fustian and gleaming Panama hat. He rolled drunkenly in the saddle, hailing every-

body on the street. Obermier came out of Deller's store and dumped a package in his buckboard at the curb.

"Ho, Harry," he shouted. "What are you celebrating?"

Sharp reined up before the Clover Saloon, sliding off his horse. "Beef just dropped two more cents a pound in Kansas City. Come on over and meet your ruin like a gentleman."

Obermier shook his head, climbing into the wagon. But Garland was no longer watching him. There were three horses hitched to the rack before Deller's general store. One of them was Tar Baby.

Blacklaws was well, then, and had returned. What was he doing in Deller's store? Getting supplies? Or finding out who had bought the iron latch from Deller?

Charlie Carew ambled out of the two-by-four Association office, pinched in between the Clover and the harness shop. He stood on the curb for a moment, idly surveying the street, pasty jowls bulging as he chewed on a cigar. At last he took this out and bent to spit, lifting one hand to keep his archaic stovepipe hat on the protuberant bulge of his skull.

At this moment Blacklaws came from the shadowed doorway of the store across the street and stepped off the curb to his horse. He was carrying no packages. For just an instant, his gaze swept up to the windows of Garland's office.

Carew had straightened from spitting, to replace his cigar again. He squinted against the sun, watching Blacklaws climb aboard Tar Baby. The man seemed unable to put much weight on his right leg. Once aboard, however, his heavy body settled into the saddle with the casual ease so typical of him. He nodded perfunctorily at the stock detective as he wheeled the black mare around, and then lined out down the street toward the river. Carew watched Blacklaws out of sight, then turned to amble back into the Association office.

Garland watched this absently, his mind on the other man. So Blacklaws knew he had gotten the latch from Deller's store. What would that mean? Simply that Blacklaws now realized Garland wanted him dead. Perhaps Blacklaws had guessed that before.

Garland left the window and tried to go back to work. But restlessness still stirred him. Finally he got his slouch hat and locked up the office. He had been meaning to go to the Manattes, and today was as good a time as any.

All the way out, obscure thoughts of Blacklaws stirred in Garland's mind. Ever since that night at Mock's, he had known he was going to kill the man. He felt little surprise that the idea could present itself without any particular shock. Perhaps it was such a natural culmination of so many years of hatred and antagonism that all impact was gone from its final appearance.

A dozen plans had occurred to him. He had thought of simply going out to Mock's and getting Blacklaws. But he doubted if he could find the way again. And he wanted no witnesses. He had considered staking out the line shack at Smoky Canes. But he had no idea when Blacklaws would come back. It would have to be something like Tate had set up. Only better. Infinitely better. Because Blacklaws would be on his guard now more than ever.

All this was still moving turgidly through him when he turned off the

river road into the *allee*, and the roof of the Manatte house, with its crumbling pan tiles, came into view above the trees ahead. Garland was still in the drive between the post oaks, however, when he caught sight of Corsica and her father on the porch. She was bending over his cane chair with an intense expression on her face, saying something. Garland could not hear them, but he did not think they had seen him. He pulled off the winding drive into the oaks and dense brush, dismounting and ground-hitching his horse and then moving through the trees on foot. Finally he was near enough to hear Corsica's voice.

"Are you sure, Dad? Why didn't you tell me before? You know how long I've been trying to get it out of you."

"Why should I tell you?" quavered Troy Manatte. "What's the difference. Why not let the past lie dead—"

"When it might mean a man's life?" Corsica's voice was brittle with impatient anger. "You know the only reason Kenny isn't up for trial now is that they never had any evidence."

"Oh, no, Corsica, it ain't that bad—"

"You know it is. Now you've got to remember this, Dad, you've got to remember what you told me."

"Sure I'll remember. Think I'm getting old or something?"

Peering through the bushes, Garland saw Corsica turn and go into the house, leaving the front door open. He heard her heels tap on the entrance hall floor, then go up the stairs. Garland went through the remaining trees at a long-legged walk, past the rusty ring-posts and up the sagging steps. The old man looked up vaguely.

"Well, Quintin. I thought you was branding this afternoon."

Garland put his hand on Troy's shoulder. "I haven't had anything to brand in ten years."

The old man winced. "Not so hard, Quintin. What's the matter?"

"What were you and Corsica talking about?" Garland asked.

Troy sat staring off at the grove so long Garland thought he would not answer. Then he started faintly. "Corsica?" he asked. "She hasn't been here all afternoon. She and her ma went off to the cotillion at the Roman place."

"Troy—" Garland's voice was sharp with impatience—"John Roman hasn't given a cotillion since 1866. Come out of it, will you? Corsica was here, talking to you, only a couple of minutes ago."

"I can't recollect."

"Listen, you old fool—"

"Let go, Quintin. You're hurting me."

Garland straightened from the old man. It seemed he had heard steps in the entrance hall. He turned to see Corsica standing there. Anger gave the oblique planes of her cheeks a glowing tint.

"What are you doing, Quintin?"

"When'd you get back from the cotillion, honey?" asked Troy.

She frowned at her father. "What were you trying to get out of him, Quintin?" Her eyes widened. "You overheard us?"

"Suppose I did."

"I would have seen you that close on the drive," she said. "You were hiding. You must have been. In the trees."

"All right," he said impatiently. "I eavesdropped. It's come to that, Corsica, when you won't trust me any more. You've misjudged me completely. You haven't even given me a chance to defend myself. Your whole idea about what I did with Phil is wrong."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Please, Corsica. Let me see you alone. I've got to."

She shrugged and turned inside, leading him into the hall and through the parlor door. Within the parlor, she turned to face him, waiting stonily. He reached out to catch her arm.

"Corsica, tell me the truth, after thinking it over, can't you see how Mock and Blacklaws twisted things out there in the shack?"

"No," she said.

"Roman and the sheriff and Obermier and all of them were after Phil, Corsica. He was sitting there in my house with that bullet in him when they came. One slip and they would have found out. He was close to passing out. They would have strung me up along with him. The feeling's that high against the rustlers."

"Is it?"

"You're refusing to see it. You're letting what Kenny and Mock said blind you."

"Maybe I've been blind up to now. Maybe they opened my eyes. You were fine and noble when you came back from Austin, weren't you, Quintin? Painted such a wonderful future for us when you had smashed Roman and made Copper Bluffs decent for the small people again. Everybody admired you so. Until they started putting on the pressure. Then you began to come apart at the seams, Quintin. I guess that business with Phil made me see you for what you are. I can't think of a lower thing you could have done. It makes me sick every time I think what that ride down to Mock's must have done to him—"

"Corsica, stop it."

"Why?" Her whole body was drawn up. "Does it hurt to see yourself so clearly, Quintin?"

"Corsica—" Little muscles in his cheek twitched as he forced a smile. He tried to draw her in, suddenly conscious of the satiny texture of her arm against his hand. "Corsica, you can't mean all this, you know you can't, a woman in love—"

"Love?" The acrid tone of her voice stopped him.

"You said you loved me—once," he murmured.

"I was a fool then." She spoke through stiff lips. "I didn't even know what love was."

He let her ease away from him slowly, without releasing her arm. "And now," he said softly, "you do?"

Her chin lifted sharply. "What if I do?"

"Blacklaws?" It escaped him sharply. She remained there in his grip, arched away from him, her eyes meeting his squarely with a scornful defiance. He let her go, and she stepped back, still looking at him. "He's come between us, then," Garland said.

An incredulous light replaced the scorn in her eyes. Then she let out a throaty laugh.

"I said he's come between us." Garland's voice was rising.

"You fool." She said it almost savagely, turning away from him to walk across the room to the divan, and then turning back. "He hasn't come between us. You did it all yourself. You showed me exactly what you were more clearly than Mock or Blacklaws could if they'd talked for a week. Whether I'm in love with Kenny or not doesn't matter at all."

"It does! If you didn't think you loved him, he couldn't have set you against me this way."

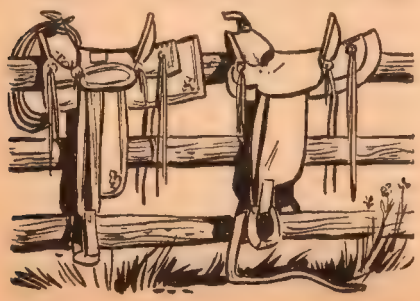
"You really believe that, don't you?"

"Believe it? I know it. Corsica, how can you feel anything for that murdering, misbegotten swine, how can you—"

The expression in her eyes finally stopped him. It wasn't anger now, or scorn. It was pity. He started to hold out his hand in some irrelevant effort to bridge the gap. Then he dropped it, and turned to go out, thinking that Blacklaws had done this. Would it never be anything but Blacklaws? It filled him with a bitter need to smash the man, to get him out of the way somehow, a need more intense than he had ever felt before.

He reached his horse and lifted the reins and turned to mount. The monotonous creak of Troy Manatte's rocker came from the end of the gallery. Through the French windows, Garland could see Corsica at the desk in one corner of the parlor, writing. As she wrote, she turned her head over one shoulder and called something out to the hall. In another moment, Dee came into the parlor. Corsica put the paper in an envelope and sealed this, then turned to hand it to Dee. There was an argument. She said something that brought an angry expression to his face. Then Dee shrugged, sullenly, and turned to go.

Garland waited. The only ones she could be writing to were Phil, down at Mock's, or Blacklaws. And with Blacklaws still in his mind, Garland wanted to see that note.



When Dee did not come out the front door, Garland circled around the house, walking through the grove to the corrals out back. Dee was saddling up a claybank in one of the pens.

It was hidden from the house by the sheds, and Garland went through one of these outbuildings, to come out in the pen. Dee saw Garland, but he finished tugging his latigo tight.

"Who was the note to?" Garland asked.

"Well—" Dee let it out on a mocking breath—"spying on us now."

"Give it to me, Dee."

"The hell I will," Dee said, turning to mount.

Garland stepped in to catch his arm, preventing his upward movement. "I said give it to me, Dee."

With a curse, Dee swung back into him, bringing his free arm around to smash Garland across the side of the head. Garland threw up his right arm to block the blow and came in under it at the same time to sink his left viciously in Dee's stomach.

Dee gasped and came over against him. Garland caught his long hair and pulled his head down till he was doubled over and hit him behind the neck. Then he took a step back and let Dee fall onto his face. Garland bent and rolled him over and fished in his pockets for the note. He ripped the sealed envelope open. The note was to Blacklaws. Corsica asked him to come to the Manatte house immediately, saying it was something terribly important.

Dee rolled over, spitting sawdust. Pain squinted his eyes shut, and he held one hand against the back of his neck.

"You've broke it," he groaned.

"I don't think so." Garland dropped the note and torn envelope in Dee's lap. "It wasn't what I was looking for."

Dee had trouble getting to his feet. He swayed. "I won't forget this, Quintin," he said. "As long as I live, I won't forget it."

"Do what you like," Garland shrugged. He turned away and went back through the sheds to the grove. With the defeat and bitterness of all the past years and of today seething at him—the murder of his father, the fact that Blacklaws might well find the packery and ruin his last chance here, the final blow of seeing how he was losing Corsica to the man—Garland knew a savage welcome of the chance this note brought.

He got his horse and left the Manattes, heading north along the river road to reach his home. And he was thinking. Blacklaws would be home. The man might have recovered, but he couldn't have been out of bed many days, and the ride into town would have been enough for him. So he'd be there at the line shack when Dee reached it. And Dee was just malicious enough to let Blacklaws know that Garland had seen the note.

And now Garland came to the stalk itself, and he was using all his intimate knowledge of Blacklaws and the processes of the man's mind. It was almost a certainty that, with Tate having failed, Blacklaws would assume, for caution's sake, that Garland was now ready to do the job himself. So all of Blacklaws's moves would be made with that in mind.

The swampy character of the country around the Sabine made it almost mandatory that a man stick to well-known trails if he had a long distance to go. There were two trails to the Manatte place from Smoky Canes. One lay north along the Neches River, to the Houston Road, then east along this through Copper Bluffs and down the Sabine Road to the Manatte house. It was a circuitous route, the longest way around, and the most secretive. Thus it was the most logical trail for a hunted man to seek.

The other route was east along the cattle trail to the Sabine and then north along the Sabine Road to the Manatte place. This was the shortest, the most open to ambush—and the least likely trail a hunted man would take. Under ordinary circumstances, that was exactly why Blacklaws would take it.

But these weren't ordinary circumstances. Blacklaws knew he wasn't being hunted by an ordinary man. He was being hunted by a man who knew better than anyone else in the world how his mind worked. So what would Blacklaws do? He'd pull another switch.

He'd think that Garland would expect him to take the cattle trail to the Sabine Road. He'd go a step further, and choose the route he would have ordinarily avoided. The Neches-Houston road. Thus, Garland reasoned.

It was a complex progression of logic, and only a man who knew Blacklaws as well as Garland did would be so sure of its conclusion. But once having reached it, he based all the rest of his plans surely upon the premise that Blacklaws would take the Neches-Houston road.

It took a half hour of hard riding for Garland to reach his own home at the head of Bayou Lafitte. He went inside to get the old Spencer repeater his father had brought back from the war. He got three tubes of cartridges and slipped them into a coat pocket.

Then he found the rifle boot, lashed this on under his left stirrup leather, and shoved the Spencer home and got back on.

Again his mind was on Blacklaws. Suppose by some wild chance the man got through to the Manattes, and then trailed him from there. It was a long shot, but Garland wouldn't overlook it. He would even plant this trail to outguess Blacklaws.

Garland wanted to get him even if he came by this route. He hadn't bothered doing anything with the trail he left from the Manatte house to his own home. That was a logical destination for him. But from here on out he'd make it look as if he were trying to hide his trail, as if he really did not want Blacklaws to come up on him from behind. Yet he'd leave just enough sign, as if he had slipped up here and there, to lead Blacklaws in a definite direction.

So he'd start by heading directly away from his true objective. That was a logical thing for a man trying to hide his trail. It took him ten minutes to reach the Houston Road, riding shale and loblolly and what water he could find in an effort to cover his tracks. He knew there was no reason to deliberately leave sign. As hard as he tried he would inevitably drop a mark here or there that Blacklaws would pick up.

Reaching the Houston road, he turned east toward Copper Bluffs, instead of west toward the Neches, which was his true goal. He kept carefully to the myriad tracks already in the road. Finally he hit the upper reaches of Mexican Creek. He turned south in the shallows of this. There were narrow sections where he could not get through without brushing the overhanging foliage. Suddenly, splashing along through the shallows and leaving all these signs that would lead a man to his death, Garland found himself smiling.

Chapter Thirteen

"A Man's Whole Life"

BLACKLAWS had expected Charlie Carew to pick him up along the trail after leaving town. But the man did not show. Blacklaws reached his shack by Smoky Canes and unsaddled and then got a chair from inside, putting it against the wall by the door. Here he sat with his healing leg thrust out straight in front of him, building a smoke and waiting for Carew.

He was sitting that way when Dee Manatte broke from the loblollies at a hard gallop and swung his claybank into a hock-scraping halt before Blacklaws, swinging off. The horse stood lathered and trembling behind him while he pulled the note from his pocket.

"Corsica sent it. I don't know what it's about."

Blacklaws took the paper, unfolded and read it. "She wants me to come to your place right away," he said.

"Yeah." A sly relish curled Dee's lips. "Garland was mighty interested."

Blacklaws looked up. "Garland?"

Dee's grin was sardonic. "Corsica wouldn't tell him what it was all about."

"But Garland did know she asked me to come."

"Yeah." Dee studied his face with narrow eyes a moment, then said, "Corsica wants me to ride for the sheriff,

too. I don't know why. My horse is about played out."

"So I see."

"Can I use Tar Baby?"

"Not the way you treat horses, Dee."

A momentary anger pinched Dee's cheeks in. Then he snorted disgustedly and turned back to the claybank. With one foot lifted into the stirrup, he turned to look back over his shoulder.

"You going?"

"I'll be there."

"Fine," Dee smiled. There was some secret enjoyment in his voice. "I'll see you." He swung around and went up with a lash of his right leg that took him into the saddle hard.

Blacklaws turned to limp inside after his saddle. It was heavy work getting it out and onto the horse, with his bad leg. As he did it, his mind was at work.

Garland wants me dead. That's obvious. Deller said he was the only one to buy a latch in the last three months. So he tried to get Tate to kill me and that failed. From here on out I've got to go on the assumption that he's out there waiting to kill me.

So take today. He knows I'm coming. There are only two feasible trails. Which one would he choose, if he was setting up an ambush? He'll be putting himself in my mind. He'll know that under ordinary circumstances I'd immediately cross off the Neches-Houston road because that's the first place another man would pick, and the first place the man stalking him would look. So that leaves the cattle trail to the Sabine road. But Garland figures that I know he's put himself in my mind. He'll expect me to go one step further to outguess him. He'll expect me to pull another switch and go right back to the Neches-Houston road. And if he means to do it today, that's where he'll be waiting.

Blacklaws led Tar Baby out of the corral and stepped aboard, and sat heavy in the saddle, staring off toward the west. For a moment he had the impulse to take the Neches-Houston route. Then he shook his head savagely.

You can't make me do that, Quintin, he thought. *You can't make me mad enough to kill you and you can't put me in a position where I have to kill you to save my own skin. So sit out there and stew, damn you.*

He turned the black mare east along the cattle trail until he reached the Sabine and then turned north along this through the last heat of the afternoon. The river was swollen and turbulent.

He broke off the river road before he came within sight of the Manatte place and walked Tar Baby up one of the back trails, hitching the mare in timber on the edge of what had once been the cotton fields. From here he walked around the fringe of the trees to the front of the house.

Through the French windows Blacklaws could see Troy Manatte sitting on the divan, and Corsica, pacing back and forth in front of the mantel. Blacklaws continued his walk, about a hundred yards away from the house, circling it completely, stopping every few feet to look for sign. No fresh marks, and if a man had been hidden here to shoot, Blacklaws would have come across him.

He finally came back to the *allee.* Corsica had stopped pacing now and was talking with her father, bent toward him intensely.

"Stay easy, Kenny."

Blacklaws felt tension grip him, at the voice from behind. Then, as noth-

ing more came, he turned. Sheriff Waco Sheridan stood twenty feet off in the trees, a stooped shape in the shadows.

"You're getting to be the most suspicious man, Kenny," he said. "What were you looking for this time?"

Blacklaws shrugged. "You're an Indian, Waco."

"Choctaw," said Waco, unsmiling. He came forward, peering at Blacklaws's face. "Couldn't quite figger out what kind of roundup this was. Thought I'd have a look-see myself before I stepped in the pen. Everything in order?"

"I couldn't beat any snakes out of the brush."

Waco tilted his head to one side, calling back over his shoulder. "Come on in, Cam."

Cameron and Dee Manatte appeared. The deputy was leading Sheridan's horse. Dee's claybank was yellow with dirty lather and still trembling. He hauled it up sharp when he saw Blacklaws.

"You really got here," he said.

Blacklaws tilted his head up, eyes heavy-lidded. "Didn't you expect me to?" he asked.

Dee studied him a moment, in a puzzled way. "I never know what to expect from you, Kenny," he said, with a faint wonder riding his voice.

Blacklaws got Tar Baby and hitched her to the rusty ring posts with the other animals, and then the four men went in. Corsica met them at the living-room door, expectancy lying pale and tense in her face.

"Well, boys," Troy said, looking up brightly as they entered the living-room. "Come for that poker game?"

Corsica turned to her father with a sharp sound of impatience. "Dad, I want you to tell the sheriff exactly what you told me on the porch this afternoon."

"I was riding this afternoon, don't you remember? Aren't you going to offer the boys drinks before we break out the cards?"

"Dad." The angry impatience pinched at her voice. "This afternoon, on the porch, you told me—" She broke off, whirling at Sheridan. "I want him to tell you of his own accord. I don't want you to think I've put any of it in his head. He's an old man, and he's tired, and his mind plays him tricks. But it isn't only that. He's afraid. He's just so afraid—"

Sheridan frowned at her, then went over to sit down beside the old man. "Now look, Troy. What's this all about?"

Troy shook his head vaguely. "If you didn't come for that poker game, why did you come?"

"Tell me a couple of things, Corsica," Sheridan said.

"Martin Garland. Tate." The last left her in a strained whisper. "Bayou Lafitte."

Blacklaws could not help looking at her sharply. She met his gaze with her eyes filled by some luminous plea. Dee slouched over to the wing chair and dropped into it.

"I'll be damned," he said.

"What about Martin Garland and Tate?" Sheridan asked Troy. The old man's senile face twisted into a frown, and he began to shake his head from side to side. Sheridan's eyes swung up to Blacklaws. "It might mean a man's whole life, Troy," he said softly. "You haven't the right to conceal a thing like that."

A childish grimace compressed Troy's face. "I'm an old man," he whispered. "My mind ain't as good as it

used to be. I can't remember what I said."

"You mean you're afraid to remember?"

"All right. So I'm afraid. Somebody will hurt me. I can't remember anything else but I know somebody will come after me and kill me if I tell who killed Martin Garland—"

His head raised sharply, eyes widening. He stared around at them. Then he lunged out of the divan suddenly. He walked toward the mantel and caught at its edge. He stood faced away from them, trembling.

"Troy," said Sheridan. "I'll give you my promise of personal protection, if that's what it will take. If you know who killed Garland, we won't rest till we get him."

"Nobody can get him." Troy's voice came out in a shrill wheeze. "He's a devil. He's got that thing in his mind about whoever tampers with his hogs."

"You're talking about Tate, now?"

"I knew Martin had killed one of his hogs." Troy was babbling now, the words spilling out over one another so fast they were hardly intelligible. "I guess nobody else ever knew. But I was with Martin on that hog hunt when he killed one of Tate's hogs. I was always scared Tate would get even. Then, a couple of months later, Martin wanted a loan. I rode over with it. Came up to the house—heard somebody shout down in the bayou—went down there afoot. Martin was whaling Kenny with that bullwhip—they didn't see me. Kenny took the whip right in his face so's he could jump Martin. Martin went over backward and hit his head. He didn't move after that. There was a lot of blood. I never saw a kid so scared. Kenny turned and ran—"

Troy broke off, sobbing, his hands gripping the mantel tightly.

"What about Tate?" asked Sheridan.

"After Kenny disappeared, I saw Martin roll over. I ran after Kenny to tell him he hadn't killed Martin. I was old then too. I got winded pretty quick and fell down. When I got my strength back I turned around and went back to Martin. I saw the whole thing through the trees. I—I—"

Corsica was bent forward, face taut with her plea. "Dad."

Troy shook his head as if in pain. "Tate was bent over Martin. He had a big rock in his hand. He must have seen the whip and figured out what had happened between Kenny and Martin. He knew Kenny'd be blamed if Martin was found dead down there with that whip. So he beat Martin's head in. When he heard me coming he dropped the rock. I had a gun or I guess he would of jumped me too. I couldn't get him though. He got away."

Sheridan leaned toward him. "Why didn't you tell, Troy? Why in God's name didn't you tell?"

"He got Martin, didn't he?" panted Troy. "He'd get me too if I told. I took the whip to keep the stain off Kenny as much as I could. I was at the point of telling a half a dozen times after, Sheridan. You've got to believe me. But Kenny had disappeared and I couldn't see what good it'd do, other than put Tate on my trail. Tate got Martin, didn't he? He'd do the same thing to me if I told. No lawman could get him. I'd be afraid to go out this door, I'd be afraid, Sheridan—"

Troy trailed off, pinching at the mantel with his frail hands. Corsica went to him, taking his arm to turn around and hold him. He pulled away and stared pathetically at Sheridan.

"You won't make me tell, will you,

Sheriff? Please don't make me tell—"

Corsica's voice was low and shaken. "I'll take him upstairs."

She led him through them to the doorway and out of sight. Sheridan raised his eyes to Blacklaws.

"How do you feel, Kenny?"

Blacklaws frowned. He could not find the immense relief he knew he should feel. He had a need to be alone. He stared around at the three men, opened his mouth to say something, then, without saying it, he turned and went out.

He was almost to the ring posts when he heard the sound of Corsica's footsteps on the gallery behind him. He halted, turning slowly to meet her. She came up to him till the swell of her breasts touched him.

"I wish I could say what's inside me, Kenny. There aren't any words." She took a deep breath, shaking her head. "I wish I could have done this nine years ago, for you."

"You've done it now, that's all that matters. I owe you more thanks than I can ever give." He took her by the arms, and their satiny warmth seemed to flow through his whole body.

She said, "I was right, wasn't I? You weren't only afraid of the anger Quintin could draw from you. You were afraid of all other emotions too."

"I suppose so," he said. "It got so mixed up in me, Corsica."

"Of course it did. You were suffering from a terrible sense of guilt. You fought it, and that's what it did to you. But now you know you're not guilty, Kenny. You don't have to fight it any more. We can face each other clearly. Nothing's between us."

He found himself pulling back. Nothing? He suddenly realized why he had not felt the relief he should have felt at finding he was not the killer of Martin Garland. There was still something unresolved. Now that the sense of guilt was gone, what would he feel toward Quintin Garland? Had his avoidance of Quintin tonight been the result of a calm, logical process of mind, or were its roots in fear?

"Corsica," he said, stepping back. "There's something I've got to do."

He saw the disappointment start in her face. Then her eyes, searching his face, widened with understanding.

"Quintin?" she said softly.

"It's got to be answered."

Fear shone in her eyes, and she reached out for him. "Kenny—"

"I've got to do it, Corsica."

He turned away, wishing he could explain it to her. But it was something a man could not tell anyone else. They would have had to live with it for nine years, as he had, borne down by it, haunted by it day and night, kept from the land he loved by it. He unhitched his mare and swung aboard. He looked down at her upturned face for a last moment. That she had ceased trying to stop him gave Blacklaws a truer measure of Corsica's understanding than he had known before.

He turned Tar Baby and headed her at a canter down the *allee* to the river road. He came around the last post oak into sight of the Sabine and Tar Baby almost pitched him off her rump, rearing up. Charlie Carew sat at the edge of the road, heavy-bellied body slack in the saddle of his horse, chewing complacently on his unlit cigar.

"Saw Dee come to town hell-for-leather after the sheriff," he said. "Thought I'd see what was up."

Blacklaws's weight settled into his rigging with a muffled creaking, his face somber. "Troy Manatte just told

Sheridan that he saw Tate kill Martin Garland."

Something fluttered through Carew's squinted eyes. Then he took a heavy breath. "Detecting's a dirty business," he said.

Blacklaws continued to stare flatly at the man, his lips shaping the words without much movement. "Did you know the whole story?"

Carew studied Blacklaws's face. "I pieced most of it together. I was out to the Manattes' with Sheridan one night and Troy started asking Corsica where his whip was. She cut him off so sharp it put me to figuring. I remembered there had been some talk about Martin Garland's whip missing after his death. Next time I went out to the Manattes, I got Troy alone and put the pressure on. He was scared to death. Enough came out for me to guess the rest."

"And you brought me back here under the threat of exposing me, knowing all the time it was Tate who had killed Garland."

Carew met his eyes. "You going to bust my guts, Kenny?"

Blacklaws stared at Carew. "I ought to," he said.

Carew's kettle-belly quivered with his short chuckle. "But you won't. I don't think that was the real reason you come back anyway. You wasn't as afraid of your own hide as you was of the fact that Corsica might get hurt in this. I wish I'd known how much that meant to you in the first place. I wouldn't have bothered with the other at all." He dipped his head. "Two hundred and fifty a month, Kenny?"

"You don't have to up the ante, Charlie." Blacklaws was staring beyond the man. "I'll see it through without that."

Carew's eyes narrowed. "Then you think Corsica's mixed up in it?"

"Not Corsica herself. Phil is. I want to know why. Did you check the Manatte investments?"

"We did. They haven't been paying enough interest during the last few months to feed a heel-fly."

Blacklaws nodded. "That's what I thought. And Phil has been giving Corsica the money he makes rustling and convincing her it's interest off the stocks."

Carew shook his head. "Corsica's done a wonderful job of holding that family together with such a small amount coming in. I don't know where they'd turn without it. I think it'd break her heart."

Blacklaws's eyes narrowed. "It would break her heart worse to find out Phil is mixed up in this."

"Maybe he's not mixed up too deep," said Carew.

"Promise me you'll do what you can for him?" said Blacklaws.

"If he'd turn state's evidence, we might even get him off completely," Carew said.

"Who was on the posse that time they found Phil playing cards with Quintin?"

Carew frowned. "Obermier, and a couple of his riders, Roman and some of his, the sheriff and his deputy."

"Sallier?"

Carew chewed harder on his cigar. "The Creole wasn't along, from what I heard."

"Harry Sharp?"

"Sharp was in town drunk."

"And who was on the posse the time before?"

"The same bunch," said Carew.

"Sallier?"

"I'm not sure."

"Sharp?"

Carew grinned disgustedly. "It would have interrupted his drinking."

Blacklaws nodded. "Next time Roman hits town raising a posse, I want to know as soon as possible just who is on the posse—and who isn't."

Absently, Carew removed his cigar. "What's going through that mind now?"

"It isn't clear yet," Blacklaws told him. "Give me a little time."

Carew turned to stare at his cigar. "Sure, Kenny," he said, frowning at the butt. "You got your time." He slowly returned the cigar to his mouth. "Just keep figuring at it. That's all I ask, Kenny. Just keep figuring at it."

Chapter Fourteen

The Stalk

THE sun was down, but its heat and the last of its reflected light remained. This left a humid mantle of dusk that seemed to stifle all sound and movement on the hogback of land which ran north and south between the Neches River and Bayou Choupique. The two bodies of water ran parallel for half a mile here, so close together that nothing but a narrow shell ridge lay between them. This ridge was hardly wider than the wheel-scarred wagon road which ran its length. On the slopes siding this road enough topsoil had gathered to support some growth, a snarled mat of stunted post oaks and pecans and their underbrush of bindweed and rozo grass.

Once a man gained the road, it was almost impossible to leave it. He could turn neither right nor left without immediately meeting a cliff so steep no horse could keep its balance, and even a man afoot would have great trouble to keep from being pitched off. A knob of pecans and palmettos at the northern extremity of the ridge commanded the road for a great distance. This was where Garland had hidden himself.

It had been the guessing game again. The place was ideal for ambush. He was completely concealed. A man coming from the south had no cover, could not gain any when the firing began without putting himself completely at Garland's mercy. It was the first place any man experienced in the stalk would expect to be ambushed from. That was exactly why Garland had chosen it. Blacklaws would never believe him fool enough to pick such an obvious place.

But the time bore down on him now. How long had he been here? Surely Blacklaws should have come by now. It was almost evening. Dusk was narrowing his circle of vision. The rozo grass was slippery and abrasive against his sweat-sodden clothes. It filled him with a maddening impulse to move.

He knew how foolish that would be. It could not last much longer. He had to keep perfectly still. He had set it up so carefully now, and Blacklaws would walk right into it.

After leaving Carew, Blacklaws pushed his mare on up the river road toward Copper Bluffs. If Garland had gone home after leaving the Manatte house earlier in the afternoon, he would have taken this route. Blacklaws substantiated that by dismounting to sift out Garland's sign from the other tracks in the road. In the failing light it was hard work, but he finally found the mark of a feather-edged horse shoe.

Garland had left this sign at Mock's, and Blacklaws had picked it up in enough other places to know it meant the copperbottom.

He reached Garland's house with dusk creeping over the land. He hitched Tar Baby in the timber and then took the necessary precautions to make sure nobody was home. He came up on the blind side of the shack after making sure the timber was empty around the house. He took still longer to make sure nobody was inside. Finally he stepped in and lit a match. It required but a moment of light to see what he wanted. Martin Garland's old Spencer repeater was gone from its horn rack on the wall.

Blacklaws shook out the match and stepped outside, and it was going through his head now. *So Garland's waiting for me somewhere along the Neches-Houston route. He's been clever up to now. He won't overlook the slim possibility that I might get through somehow and come up on him from this direction. So what'll he do with his trail away from here?*

Garland's tracks heading away from the house were clear. Blacklaws got Tar Baby and followed them out onto the trail that led back to the Houston Road. It took him into a grove of loblollies. He lost it and had to dismount and circle to pick it up. At last he realized that Garland was trying to hide his trail. That was natural. But it was not quite right.

Blacklaws reached the Houston Road and finally made out the tracks heading east, toward Copper Bluffs. Again that was natural. If a man's true objective was the Neches, an obvious step in throwing off pursuit would be to turn in exactly the opposite direction. Blacklaws kept his eye peeled for where Garland might have turned off. Reaching Mexican Creek, he found that Garland went in but did not come out. The man had turned upstream or down to hide his tracks in water. Downstream would take him in the direction of the Neches. Blacklaws turned this way. A hundred yards of riding the shallows and he found where overhanging agrita had been scraped against something at the height of a horse's flank.

What's Quintin doing? On the surface he's a man trying like hell to hide his trail. But he must know he can't hide it completely. He hasn't time, if he wants to reach the Neches ahead of me. So he doesn't really want to hide his sign. He just wants to make me think he's trying to. Why?

A tracker went on one of two premises, in this case. Either the man he was following had tried to hide the sign, or was using it to lure the tracker into a trap. If a man was trying to hide his sign, he obviously did not want the tracker to follow him, and therefore could not use the trail as a decoy.

That's what Garland wants to put in my mind, thought Blacklaws. *He figures that if I think he's really trying to hide the trail, I won't be looking for it to lead me into a trap.*

The night had come now. The velvety texture of its blackness pushed insistently against Garland, where he lay in the rozo grass, as if to mock him for his incapacity to see.

The moon should be up in a few minutes. He shifted impatiently and quit trying to see anything along the road. It was too late anyway. Whether the moon rose or not, it was too late. Blacklaws would have come by now. There was only one chance left.

Garland turned his head to look down over the land through which his back trail from where it left the trees would still come that way. If Blacklaws knew Garland was out here, and had somehow taken the Sabine Road and gotten through to the Manatte house, there was still a chance that he would track Garland home and then out here.

Garland found his eyes following the back trail from where it left the trees on the opposite bank of the bayou. He had crossed the water at a ford, and had ridden on up to a saddle in the ridge. Garland now was just above the saddle, in his thicket of palmettos and pecans. He had ridden on north and picketed his horse out of sight and earshot, and had then returned. But the horse's tracks led through the saddle almost directly past his ambush.

Blacklaws would not expect Garland to choose such an obviously ideal spot for ambush, Garland had figured. An ordinary man might have chosen such a spot. But Blacklaws would figure that Garland was too smart for that. He'd think Garland would know it was the first place an experienced stalker would look for an ambush.

So Blacklaws would look for Garland to be somewhere else along the ridge, in a spot so unsuitable for ambush no one would expect it to be there. No timber grew north of the saddle, and soon the ridge itself dropped off into a salt-grass prairie devoid of cover. So it would not be north. Blacklaws would be looking somewhere south of the saddle. And the approach to any of the likely spots down there would lead the man into Garland's vision.

So there it was. He had the man coming and going. It gave him a deep satisfaction to go back over every little detail, seeing how cleverly he had worked it out, realizing how inevitable Blacklaws's death was. Perhaps Blacklaws hadn't been at the line shack after all when Dee came. Maybe Dee had left the note, and Blacklaws had come home later. Maybe he'd still be arriving by the road.

Garland became aware of great lemon drops splashing the darkness all about him, and he looked up to see that it was the foliage, dappling the light of a rising moon. He stared back down the road, able to see clearly now, and settled himself carefully to wait. It wouldn't be long now.

He's left the creek here. That's copper hair on the grapevine. It's his copperbottom all right. Be easier to follow him in the moonlight.

Blacklaws left Mexican Creek on Garland's trail, heading due west now, directly toward the Neches. The moon made a tangled silhouette of the timber and turned the glades and open patches into brazen pools. He could move faster with its illumination. But he still kept his cover and did his circling at the open spots and kept throwing out decoys before showing himself.

He did not stick as close to the sign itself now. The direction was fairly obvious, and much of the country was so boggy Garland could have taken only one course through it. Then the bogs fell behind and the timbered prairies began spreading out before Blacklaws.

Finally, threading his way through a dense stand of loblolly and dogwood, he came upon a curving arm of water, its stagnant surface shimmering like

black silk in the moonlight. The only water this side of the Neches was Bayou Choupique. He followed its course west through heavy timber. Then, ahead of him, it ran up against a high shell ridge, making a right-angle turn to change its direction and head almost due north along the base of the ridge. Blacklaws knew where he was now. The Neches was on the other side of that ridge, and the wagon road ran along its top.

He got off Tar Baby and made his way afoot through the cover of timber till he came to the turn in the bayou. He knew Garland might well be up on that ridge, and he made his way northward along the bayou till he spotted a ford, and then crawled on his belly through the creeper and bindweed till he could look out on this. He soon found the sign Garland had left. The bayou was so narrow at this spot that Blacklaws could see where Garland had gone out of the water on the other side. These signs led Blacklaws's eyes up the shell ridge directly to a saddle. Overlooking the saddle and commanding the road to the south was a mat of palmettos and bindweed which could easily conceal a man.

It's an ideal spot for ambush, Blacklaws thought. *The kind of place an ordinary man would pick. But an experienced hunter would know it was the first place the man he was ambushing would look. Garland would know that.*

Is that what he wants me to think? That he's too smart to pick a place like this? It's what I would ordinarily think. He's tried to make it even more convincing by riding his horse up through the saddle. Only a fool would let his trail lead directly to his ambush. Not a man of Garland's intelligence.

So you've played the fool, Quintin, and this is the spot you've picked.

A cat had begun screaming somewhere out along the bayou. Its piercing sound kinked at Garland's nerves till he had the sense of something drawn unbearably taut within him. His eyes ached with trying to penetrate the shadows the timber cast farther down the road.

For the hundredth time, Garland found himself twisting around to stare behind him at his back trail. If Blacklaws was coming from behind, he would come through timber to the ford in the bayou, following Garland's sign, and see the trail crossing the ford and coming right up through the saddle. He wouldn't believe Garland was in the trees above the saddle. Garland had already settled that in his own mind. Where would Blacklaws look, then?

North of the saddle the ridge was completely barren and the prairie beyond was devoid of cover. So Garland could not be there. South of the saddle the ridge fell away in those steep shell cliffs, with timber filling the hollows and fissures in matted clusters. It would be an awkward, illogical place for an ambush. For that very reason, Blacklaws would figure Garland was down there somewhere. And how would Blacklaws approach it?

Garland had that figured out too. Blacklaws could not approach the ridge from the north. A snake couldn't get across that open prairie without being seen. That left him but one of two routes.

To take the first route, a man would have to back-track through timber till he was out of sight of the ridge, then cross the bayou beyond its turn, where

it ran east and west. Then he would follow the bayou's south bank till he reached the turn once more. Now he would be on the inside bank, the one nearest the ridge, in timber that grew thickly enough to afford cover all along the base of the ridge. An ordinary man would immediately choose this. It was the safest, and provided the most cover.

But an experienced stalker would know his ambusher was probably watching that route the closest. So he would take the more exposed and dangerous way, crossing the bayou somewhere near the ford, where he would be least expected to appear.

However, as before, Garland had to go one step further to account for Blacklaws. The man would realize Garland had figured it that way, and would pull his usual switch. Instead of taking the route of the experienced hunter, he'd do what he thought Garland would not expect him to do, and take the course of the amateur. He would back-track and cross the bayou where he could not be seen and then come up through the trees on the inside bank. Thus Garland reasoned.

He settled into the rozo grass again, trying to ease the tension in him. That would not do. He had to be steady when it came. He lifted one hand from the rifle and held it out. It was trembling.

If I remember this spot right, Blacklaws thought, *there's a prairie at the northern tip of that ridge. I couldn't get across there if I was a flea. What does that leave? I could back-track and cross the bayou out of sight and then come back along the south bank. It would take me right up against the ridge when the bayou turned. But that's the first route a bushwhacker would expect a man to take.*

The bayou here would be the smarter approach. It's almost too exposed to get across. About the only way would be to slip out from that drift log just north of the ford and swim under water to those hyacinths in the middle. Get a breath in them and make it under water to that clump of bindweed on the opposite bank. It's the route a man who knew his stalking would use. Then that's exactly why Garland won't expect me to use it. He's figuring I'll pull a switch here. He'll expect me to do what any amateur would do and come up through those trees on the south bank.

So I'll go back and take Tar Baby across to the south bank. She's just thirsty enough to browse toward water if I turn her loose below the turn in the bayou. Fifty-fifty Quintin will see the movement. Maybe it'll hold his attention enough so I can get across the bayou here.

The cat had stopped screaming. Garland suddenly realized there was no other sound. The crickets had stopped too. Blacklaws was here.

A motion in the trees at the base of the ridge caught Garland's eye. He started to turn sharply. He checked himself and moved his head carefully.

Then he saw the furtive motion again, coming toward him through those trees along the inside bank of the bayou. Garland felt a vindictive triumph. Blacklaws had done exactly as he had figured. The man was moving through that timber, looking for Garland somewhere south of the saddle.

If he kept coming in this direction, it would lead him right underneath Garland. There would not be twenty feet between them. A perfect shot.

You did all right by me, Tar Baby. Garland's watching those trees. He would have shot if he'd seen me crossing the bayou. There's enough cover going up the slope to that saddle now to get right on top of him. But that last flash of Tar Baby was too near water. I'll have to make noise if I want to reach Garland before she shows. Then it all depends on what kind of noise I make.

Garland licked dry lips, settling himself carefully. That last motion had been very near thinning timber. In another moment Blacklaws would unwittingly move into Garland's sight. He would be screened from farther down the ridge, where he thought Garland was, but he would expose himself to the saddle.

Then a small crackling sound from behind whirled Garland about. The noise came again. He started to swing his Spencer around. Then he checked it. Blacklaws was too good in the brush to make that much noise. It didn't have the character of a body passing through undergrowth. It was a smaller sound. A rattling sound.

Could Blacklaws be throwing rocks over Garland's head to make it sound as if he was coming in from behind, when really he was still in those trees below? Garland turned back the way he had been watching.

Quintin's had time to figure it out now. He knows I'm good enough in the brush so I wouldn't make that much noise. He'll think those rocks I'm throwing are coming over his head from the trees below.

There was another crackling from behind Garland. His whole body stiffened at repressing an impulse to turn. Maybe Blacklaws had outguessed him and figured where the ambush was. But he knew what the man was doing now. Blacklaws wanted him to expect it from behind, and when he was turned that way, would come in on him from the other direction. Well, he wouldn't panic. He'll still outguess the man.

Give me another second, Tar Baby. He's got his gun on those trees for good now and he won't turn around when I make the noise coming in from behind.

There was an abrupt motion at the thinning edge of timber. Garland tightened his finger on the trigger. A riderless black horse stepped from the trees. Garland felt his whole body lift in surprise. Then the noise behind blossomed into a crash of undergrowth and he could not help turning.

"Kenny!"

Blacklaws caught the barrel of the rifle before it could be swung into him and tore it from Garland's grasp and threw it aside as he crashed on into the man. Garland was already coming up off his crouch into Blacklaws with that shout still holding his mouth wide open.

Blacklaws went into Garland with the man's arms going around his waist, his momentum carrying the lawyer backward. They flopped over once with a crashing of brush and then pitched off the edge of the steep slope. Grappled, they tumbled down through crushed shells and bindweed. A mat of palmettos and agrita clinging to the cliff finally caught them for an instant. Blacklaws tried to tear free of Garland, punching at the man's face. He

felt his blow snap against bone, saw Garland's head jerk back. But Garland clawed at him, beating at the side of his head.

It knocked Blacklaws back down and tore both men free of the tree and they starting rolling again. They caromed off another tree. It knocked Garland free. But the slope dropped more steeply and Blacklaws could not keep himself from rolling on down to the bottom. He flopped through underbrush and crunching shell to end up in the mucky shallows of the bayou.

He rolled to his hands and knees, choking and sputtering. Through blinking eyes, he saw Garland coming to his feet out of the water and lunging this way.

Garland struck him before he had his feet beneath him. Their combined weight went against Blacklaws's bad leg, and he collapsed. He went under water again, with Garland on top. Blacklaws caught one of the man's flailing arms, trying to twist Garland off. His head came out of water. Then a smothering weight smashed into his face, putting his head under again.

Garland fought to keep himself on Blacklaws's head, holding it under with all the weight of his body, beating at Blacklaws. The blood was pounding in Blacklaws's head till he thought it would burst. At last he had to breathe. Water flooded in. Sensation spun. His body writhed in a paroxysm.

With a last desperate upheaval, he shifted enough to get one knee beneath him and twist a shoulder under Garland. The man tried to drive him down once more, but Blacklaws lunged up beneath him. He tore an arm free and struck at Garland's middle. The lawyer gave a gasp and went backward.

Blacklaws could not rise for a moment. All he could do was crouch there on one knee, coughing and choking, making retching sounds with the effort of sucking in air.

He saw Garland coming onto hands and knees again, spitting mud. He saw Garland getting up to lunge, and knew he could never meet it on his bad leg. So he drove to his feet and dove at the man.

He hit Garland amidships, knocking him backward. The man almost went over, but caught himself. He struck viciously at the back of Blacklaws's neck. Face buried against Garland's coat, Blacklaws heard his own muffled grunt of pain. It stunned him. It cost him agony to gather enough concentration to start driving with his legs. Garland gave him another rabbit punch. Now Blacklaws didn't even know what his body was doing. It was only that one grim idea in his mind—to keep driving, keep driving.

From a vast distance he heard the sloppy sound of his feet in the mud. Then he felt another blow against his neck. But it lacked force.

Arms about the man's waist, Blacklaws churned the water with his driving legs. And finally Garland went over backward. Blacklaws lost his grip and sprawled out on top of the man.

Garland tried to roll over beneath him. Blacklaws smashed at his face. Garland brought a knee up between Blacklaws's legs. The pain of it dropped Blacklaws down on Garland, sickened and helpless. He heard his own groans. He felt Garland's wild struggle to squirm from beneath his dead weight. Finally he felt Garland's hair against his hand. He tangled it through his fingers. He struck feebly at Garland's face with his other hand. From somewhere far off there was an omi-

nous rumbling sound.

Garland's struggles grew wilder. He was squirming backward, like an eel, trying to get out ahead of Blacklaws. But Blacklaws kept his grip on that hair. He had the strength to pull Garland's head up now, so he could strike at it.

"Please, Kenny—the 'gators—"

"Should have—thought of that—before," Blacklaws panted.

With a crazy sound, Garland began fighting him again. Blacklaws was on his hands and knees over the man. Garland tried to pull backward. There was something behind the lawyer. Blacklaws saw that they were up against the huge knees of a cypress. His blow knocked Garland's head back against the gnarled trunk. His fist came away covered with blood.

Unable to go any farther backward, Garland heaved out against him. Blacklaws knocked him back again. Garland blocked Blacklaws's next blow, tried to catch the arm. Blacklaws let go his hair and hit him with that fist. He was on his knees astraddle the man now. He kept smashing Garland's head against the tree. Finally he realized Garland was struggling no longer.

He dropped to his hands there in the shallow water, above the man. It was agony trying to get enough air. His whole body swelled and fought for it.

He did not know how long he crouched like that. He heard more 'gators lashing the water out in the bayou, and rumbling, and could do nothing about it. He simply remained there, hoping the 'gators would not come.

Finally he gained enough strength to fumble at Garland's hair in the water beneath him. It seemed to take him ages to drag the man out of the water up into the rozo grass. He left Garland on a slant, one arm under his face, so the water would leak out of his mouth. He didn't know whether the man was drowned or not.

He sat down against the bell-shaped trunk of a cypress, dizzy now. Things were far away for a while. Finally Blacklaws saw breath stir Garland's ribs. After a long time, Garland belched. He tried to lift himself up. He got twisted around on his side, but could not rise. His filmed eyes found Blacklaws. Blacklaws heard his own sounds. It sounded like the gasping of a windsucker.

Garland belched up more water, was sick in the grass. Still Blacklaws could not stop those crazy sounds. Garland finally found his voice.

"What in hell you laughing at?"

"I'm not mad, Quintin. That's what I'm laughing at. You can't make me mad. All through the fight I wasn't mad. You can't make me kill you and you can't ever make me mad again."

Chapter Fifteen

Dollar Sign

IT WAS after midnight when Blacklaws got back to the line shack. He was so beaten and exhausted that he could not even unsaddle his horse; he ran it into the corral with the kack on and then went inside and threw himself fully clothed onto the bunk. He lay in a half-stupor for a while, and finally fell asleep. He awoke near noon, stiff and aching in every joint.

Now an urgent desire to see Corsica seized him. He could hardly take time to eat breakfast. He was filled with an

exalted sense of freedom, as if the fetters of nine years had just been cut loose. He wanted to share it with Corsica, to tell her that what she had said yesterday was fully true now—nothing stood between them.

He realized now why he had been unable to feel the relief he should at finding out Tate had murdered Martin Garland. His sense of guilt for that killing had not resided completely within himself. Part of it had attached itself to Quintin.

Somehow Quintin had come to symbolize Blacklaws's fear of his own anger. Perhaps this had some of its roots in the deep antagonism which had lain between the two from the first. Most of it must have stemmed from the fact that Quintin was Martin's son, and was so inextricably involved with all that had led up to the killing. So that in coming back to Quintin, Blacklaws had been coming back to Martin all over again. But now he had proved to himself that he could meet Quintin without a recurrence of what had happened with Martin. He had been able to fight Quintin without that rage he had so feared.

With this uplifting him, Blacklaws left his shack and took the river road to the Manatte house. A few miles south of Copper Bluffs, he met King Wallace, rattling down the road in his cut-under wagon. The man pulled up and slacked out long and angular in the seat, offering Blacklaws a chew. Blacklaws declined. "What's new in town, King?"

King cheeked his tobacco. "Big cut of Sharp's cattle run off near midnight. Roman's in town yelling for Sheridan to round up a posse."

Blacklaws spoke with a quiet restraint. "Was Sallier with Roman?"

"The Creole?" King frowned judiciously. "Can't rec'llect seeing him."

"Where was the rustling?"

"Over near Mexican Creek."

"Heading right into the Thicket?"

"Where else? Nobody's ever going to find that packery. Might as well turn Jefferson County over to the rustlers."

Blacklaws waited till the man was out of sight, then cut off the road, turning back in the same direction Wallace had taken. He pushed through timber and bog till he judged he was south of the slower-moving wagon, and out of Wallace's sight, then turned back onto the road.

He knew the ride he would have to make would be a terrible drain on Tar Baby. But it had to be done. He reached the New Orleans cattle trail, turned west. He passed the cut-off to his shack, kept going along the trail.

He was an hour and a half west of the Sabine when he reached Mexican Creek. The trail south along the creek was a poor one, but if the rustling had been done near this creek, it was the waterway they would use to drive the cattle in. And if the rustling had taken place near midnight, they wouldn't have reached the coast much before now. Driving a herd of cattle through this swampland was a slow job, even when you pushed them. And the rustlers would have wasted a couple of hours building that false trail into the Big Thicket to throw the posse off. So they wouldn't have hit the coast much ahead of Blacklaws.

He headed south, through a tangled woodland of moss-hung cypress that ringed swamps choked with pale hyacinth. He did not bother to cut sign on the banks of the creek. He had a good idea where the cattle would be brought out of the water. He had been riding

well over two hours when he reached the first salt-grass prairies. The steers grazing across these open flats bore the Double Sickle brand on their gaunt hips.

At last the stench reached him. It put Tar Baby to fiddling fretfully beneath him. The creek turned away and the trail topped a rise and brought Blacklaws into view of the sea, and of the Roman house.

It sat proudly on the bluff to his left, overlooking the Gulf. Directly beneath the house stood the slaughter shanties, the corrals, and the huge vats, encrusted with dirty white brine, where the tallow was rendered. Just west of these vats, the dunes began, a tumbled labyrinth of sand and pickle-grass, criss-crossed with the stagnant green fingers of water that probed in from the lagoons farther west.

The road curling down from the house ran through a cove of timber before it turned out on the flats and reached the pens. Blacklaws approached through this timber, keeping hidden from the house above, crossed the road where it was covered by the trees, and dismounted in the last fringe of stunted oaks. The sand dunes blocked off his view of the shanties and pens, but he could hear the plaintive bawl of cattle.

He moved westward till the road turned away from him, and finally reached the dunes where they were out of sight of the house. He ground-hitched Tar Baby here and moved into the first sandy trough between two dunes. Some of the gulches were filled with stagnant water, and he was dripping ooze by the time he again came into sight of the outbuildings.

He crouched against the sloping side of a dune, studying the shanties. There was no sign of men. If they felt safe enough to leave the cattle in the pens without slaughtering and skinning immediately, they might also feel safe enough to go up to the house for breakfast and a rest after their grueling ride.

Blacklaws did not care about rounding the rustlers up now. He had no official capacity to make arrests. All he wanted was definite word he could take back to Sheridan. Then the place could be staked out by enough men to handle the whole bunch of rustlers without a slip-up.

He wanted a look at those cattle. It was as simple as that. And he could not do it without taking a chance. There was ten feet of open flats between this last dune and the first long shanty. Once in there, he could move through to the other end and see the pens. He waited another long space, looking for fresh sign, for some indication that anyone was down here.

He took a last look at the house. Then he stood up and took four long strides to the slaughter shanty, swinging open the door and stepping in. It was gloomy inside and rank with the stench of blood and rotten meat. Sides of beef hung on hooks from the flimsy rafters, and there was a pile of bloody hides at the far end. He went down there, checking the brand on one. It was the Double Sickle.

The door at this end was open. He squinted his eyes against the fine dust raised by the cattle in the yonder pens. The brand on their hips was Harry Sharp's Dollar Sign.

"Don't turn around, Blacklaws," said a man from behind. "Just take out your gun and drop it and kick it out the door."

Little muscles kinked up all across his back. He recognized the cynical drawl. It was Lee Deff. He finally lifted

his Remington from its holster and dropped it, and gave it a kick.

"Get it now, Phil," said Deff.

In a moment, Phil Manatte appeared in front of Blacklaws, outside the shanty. He stood staring at Blacklaws with a surprised hurt in his eyes. Finally he gave a little shake of his head and bent to pick up the Remington. When he straightened with the gun, his lips were tight. Blacklaws saw that there was still a heavy bandage on the boy's wounded shoulder, and his face was gaunt and pale.

Blacklaws turned to see Deff coming down from the other end of the shed, his Ward-Burton held in the crook of an elbow.

"Funny how things work," he said. "We was eating breakfast up in the house when Sallier saw the surf pulling one of the dories off. He sent us down to get it back on shore. Wouldn't have seen you at all but for that boat."

Blacklaws wanted to kick himself for not watching the shore more closely.

"I guess we better go upstairs," Deff said.

The dust of the road ruffled beneath their feet like fine powder. Deff walked behind, but Phil came up beside Blacklaws.

"How's the wound, Phil?" asked Blacklaws.

"Kenny—" began Phil, raising his hand in a vague protest. Then he dropped it helplessly, looking down at the road. "Taking time to heal, I guess," he said.

"How'd you get in this, Phil? Trying to convince Corsica those stocks were still paying off?"

Phil looked up in surprise. "I had to, Kenny. Those stocks were all that was holding us together. If she found out they were worthless, it would break her."

"You underestimate your sister," Blacklaws said. He sent Phil a sidelong glance. "How deep you in it, kid?"

"That job I got shot on was my second time out," Phil said.

"That's not very deep," Blacklaws told him. "Law might not be hard on you, considering the circumstances. Ever hear of state's evidence? They give you a break for that."

"Take it easy, Blacklaws," Deff said.

They walked on up the road, with Phil rubbing his wounded shoulder. But a new expression had entered his face.

"Roman told me what Gauche and Agate did to you at Mock's, trying to find out where I was," he said.

"I thought Roman was after you for the rustling at the time," Blacklaws said. "I didn't know you were working for him."

"It doesn't matter what you thought." There was a puzzled wonder in the boy's eyes. "Roman said they tortured you."

Blacklaws's grin was flat. "They were starting to put the screws on, I guess."

"Why did you hold out, Kenny? Why didn't you tell?"

"I didn't want Roman to hand you over to the sheriff, Phil."

"But you knew I was a hide rustler by that time."

"I wasn't sure, Phil. You were still my friend."

"Yeah." Phil dropped his eyes to the road. "Remember how you used to try and teach me that hooley-ann?"

"You were pretty young to learn roping, Phil."

"I could have got it better if you'd stayed. Never nobody to take the time

with me the way you did." He looked up sharply, and then turned back to Deff. "Listen, Lee, you can't just—"

"Just what?" Deff asked. They had reached the dooryard, and he halted, rifle cradled in one elbow. "What Blacklaws saw out in the pen could hang us all, if he ever told," the man said.

"Listen—"

"You listen, kid," said Deff, in a fatherly cynicism. "You'd just foul everything up if you tried to get Blacklaws out of this. You're too damn weak to start gunning at us. Even if you got the drop and pulled Blacklaws out, do you think you could last, with that shoulder? We'd be right on your tail. You'd hold Blacklaws down so much we couldn't help but get him. And do you think he'd leave you? You'd just make him dead meat for sure."

The truth of this made its imprint in Phil's face, and he gave a helpless glance to Blacklaws.

"You better get back down and see if anybody else is coming, kid," said Deff. "And remember, it's your neck as well as ours."

Phil turned to go down the road. But Blacklaws had caught a faint flash in the boy's eyes, as they sent a momentary glance to the northward. He hoped he was right about what that meant. Phil might be too weak with his wound to put up a fight and get away with Blacklaws, but there was still a chance of riding for help.

He turned inside at a wave of Deff's gun. Afternoon shadows softened the squalor of cracked mirrors and fallen plaster. Blacklaws went through the entrance hall and into the living-room ahead of Deff. He stopped within the door at sight of Mock Fannin, sitting on the couch. Mock came forward in his surprise, hanging there on the edge of the couch, and the two of them stared emptily at each other. Blacklaws felt a vague sickness.

"I should have listened to you," he said. "The only time in your life you told the truth. John Roman and a thousand hides a day and a hundred thousand dollars a year."

There was a protest in the way Mock's slack mouth parted. But he did not say anything. Finally he settled back in the couch, still gazing helplessly at Blacklaws. The other man in the room was Gauche Sallier, lounging indolently against the mantel, ironic amusement in his sooty eyes.

"Blacklaws was down by the pens," Deff told the Creole. "He saw the Dollar Sign stuff."

"Roman should have let me finish with you up there at Mock's," Sallier murmured.

"We better wait till Roman comes back," Deff said.

Sallier nodded at the wing chair. Blacklaws went over and sat down. Mock got up from the couch and ambled to the sideboard where a decanter of whisky stood.

"I'm going to get drunk," he said.

Deff put his rifle against the wall and built himself a smoke. Then he walked to the French windows and stood looking out, drawing deeply. Mock stayed by the sideboard, drinking steadily. Whenever he met Blacklaws's glance, there was a strange, twisted look in his eyes.

The shadows lengthened. The men shifted restlessly around the room. Time became a palpable thing. Blacklaws could almost feel it running out between his fingers. He had never realized before how precious it could be.

It was late afternoon when Roman came. The road trembled to drumming

hoofs and the voices swelled up outside. There was the creak of saddle leather, and Roman's shout as he came into the entranceway.

"Gauche, you here? Everything went like a Swiss watch. Innes made a trail into the Thicket with what Dollar Sign stuff you left him. I pushed Sheridan and Obermier along till they were so deep in the Thicket they almost didn't find their way out. I figured I gave you enough time to get here—"

He had reached the door from the entrance hall to the living-room, with the others coming in behind him. His hoarse voice cut off at the sight of Blacklaws. Agate Ayers and Eddie Hyde and two other riders banked up behind him, the clatter of their boots dying.

"Deff found him down on the flats checking the Dollar Sign stuff," Sallier murmured.

Roman stared at Blacklaws. "Who you working for, Kenny?"

"What does it matter?" Blacklaws answered.

Roman studied him a moment longer. Then he stamped viciously across the room past Blacklaws to the side table. Mock solemnly poured him a drink. Roman took it neat.

"I should have known it," he said. "All the stock dicks in the state chasing around for years and not a bobble. Then you come back and figure it all out with that head of yours in a few weeks. The sheriff couldn't of brought you back. Was it Charlie Carew? Feature that! The head of the Jefferson Association doesn't even know when his own detectives bring in a man to expose him." He snorted ruefully. "How long you known it was me?"

"Not till today, for sure," Blacklaws said, realizing there was no use at pretense. "It came together in pieces. First it was Garland, claiming to have something on you that would let the rustlers operate without interference from you. I couldn't figure out why the rustlers didn't get in touch with Garland. The only logical answer was that what Garland had was no good—or that you were with the rustlers. Then Phil told me about the wet-blanket job Garland had found with your brand on the outside and the old Quarter Moon on the inside." Blacklaws looked up at Roman. "Why didn't you let Garland know it was useless?"

Roman grinned. "Garland thought he could gain more out of what he had by selling it to the rustlers than by turning it over to the law. As long as I kept him thinking that, he wouldn't give it to the law." He sobered. "But that was only part of the picture. What completed it?"

"I cut sign of a couple of rustlings," Blacklaws said. "I saw how you were leaving a phony trail into the Thicket and running the bulk of the stuff off in water. Then I found out Sallier was never with you when you were in town raising a ruckus. I figured he was the one running the cattle while you were throwing everybody off the trail."

Roman was staring into his empty glass again, talking almost to himself. "I couldn't of done it any other way, Kenny. The only reason I'm still able to operate is I've kept up enough volume of hides and tallow to make it pay off. I couldn't have done that with just my own herds."

"I wasn't actually sure it was you till today," Blacklaws said. "It didn't surprise me. A man who was capable of branding through a wet blanket in the old days would be capable of rustling hides now."

Roman's head lifted, blood darkening his face. "You know how we get rid of spoiled beef here, Kenny? We drag it out to the end of the pier and dump it off. Those sharks pick it so clean nobody'd ever find any remains."

Blacklaws felt tension fill his body, as he saw how his time had run out. Roman looked at Sallier. Then he turned to walk to the French windows, his back to the room.

Sallier moved to the end of the couch, looking down at Blacklaws. "Get up," he said. "We'll go down to the pier."

Chapter Sixteen

"I'll Kill You Too."

CORSICA MANATTE was standing out on the low bluffs, staring down at the river. It seemed she had been standing here before, in some other life, waiting for a rider to show up. And when he had come, it had not been the one she expected.

She felt no surprise when the horseman first appeared down the road, a shadowy form in the mist, resolving itself slowly as it approached.

"Dee?" she asked. The man did not answer, walking his horse on toward her, and then she recognized him, and his name escaped her on a whisper. "Quintin."

He halted the copperbottom beside her, staring down with a strange expression on his face. His voice sounded unnatural. "You were expecting Dee?"

She felt a sharp fear as she saw the bruises on his face. "Quintin," she said breathlessly. "You—and Kenny—"

He seemed to lift in the saddle, something sharp and savage narrowing his face. He settled back slowly, without answering her, a ridge of white flesh formed around his compressed lips. Then she became aware of the saddlebags, loaded till they bulged, and the valise lashed on behind the cantle. The fear left her in a rush of understanding.

"You didn't kill him. You're leaving. He whipped you. You wouldn't be leaving unless he whipped you—"

His eyes regained focus on her. "Listen, Corsica, he's nothing but a tinhorn detective, that's all he came back for, he didn't come back for you, and when he's through with this he'll leave again; why even think about him any more?" For an instant, the bitterness gave his voice its old vitality.

"And you did everything you could to stop him," she said. "You knew that out of all the men along the river he was the most likely to find the packery. And now that he's whipped you, he'll go on and find it. He's going to find it before you do, Quintin, and it's too late for you. That's it, isn't it?"

He leaned farther toward her. "Corsica, come away with me. Austin, St. Louis, Chicago. Any of the big towns—"

"You still don't understand, do you?" she said.

That moment of bitter vitality drained slowly from him. The mist planted waxen shadows in the hollows of his cheeks, rendering his face gaunt and aged. The eyes lost their restless shine and took on a dark emptiness. It seemed a long time before he took up the reins and turned his horse on down the road. Watching him disappear into the mist, Corsica thought she had never seen such defeat in a man.

She could feel none of the anger, the scorn she had known when she had first begun to see what he truly was. She

felt a vague pity. It almost frightened her now to realize that if Blacklaws had not come back, she might have gone on thinking what she felt for Garland was love, and waiting for him to gain those glittering heights of ambition so they could marry.

She turned back in toward the house. Now it was striking her as strange irony that neither of the men had been killed. It had seemed that a killing was inevitable, that the intensity of antagonism between them would be satisfied by nothing less. Then she realized that Blacklaws's triumph would have been hollow if he had been forced to kill Garland. It was the thing he had run from in the first place, and to come back to it would only have deepened his defeat.

She walked back down the drive and up onto the porch. She was about to go inside when a movement out in the grove caught her eye. She peered intently, trying to make out Dee. The motion became a man. He seemed to be veering and stumbling. She caught at a colonette in horrified surprise as she recognized Tate.

His matted hair hung down over his face. His left hand was pressed tight into the blood-soaked shirt over his ribs. In his other hand he held a Bowie knife. The creaking of Troy Manatte's rocker stopped, at the end of the gallery.

"It's Tate," he said. "Looks like he's hurt."

"Dad—" her voice came out with great difficulty— "get up, get inside quick."

"That's no kind of hospitality," Troy said. "Man's hurt. We've got to take care of him."

She whirled to run down the gallery, catching her father's arm. "Dad, don't you understand? Get up. Please—"

The old man floundered to his feet, fighting her irascibly. They reached the end of the railing just as Tate came to the bottom of the steps. Troy pulled up here.

"Let go," he muttered. "This man needs help. Come on inside, Tate. My wife'll take care of you. How did it happen, Tate?"

"Waco Sheridan," said Tate in a hoarse voice, swaying there at the bottom of the steps. "Waco Sheridan and his deputy. They said they wanted me for Martin Garland's murder. You're the only one who could have told."

Troy frowned vaguely. "Martin ain't dead. I saw him not an hour ago."

"I should have come and got you a long time ago, but I thought your brains was all clabbered and you couldn't remember anything any more. But you did, didn't you? You told 'em all about Martin Garland."

Corsica saw the veil shred across Troy's eyes. He touched his forehead in a vague, wondering way, looking beyond Tate. Suddenly he stiffened, voice shrill.

"Corsica, where's Sheridan, he said he'd protect me, I told you Tate would come—"

He pulled away from her. Fear made a parchment mask of his face. With a snarling sound, Tate began to come up the steps. Corsica moved in front of her father, backing toward the door after him.

"Tate," she pleaded. "You can't gain anything by doing this."

"I can pay him back. I can pay them all back." There was a delirious light to Tate's eyes. "You're as bad as the rest. Think you kin do anything to old Tate. You told 'em, Troy. I'll get you for it."

Corsica backed into the hall. Tate stumbled on the steps, got up again unsteadily, and staggered up the steps and across the gallery into the entrance hall, maneuvering between Corsica and the stairway with a darting motion.

"You won't get away," he gasped. "I'll kill you, Troy."

"Where are they?" said Troy in a shrill voice. "They promised they'd protect me."

With her own backing body, Corsica forced her father through the door into the parlor. She realized she was holding her breath, and let it escape on a small sobbing sound.

"You're crazy," she said. "You're as crazy as those razorbacks."

"That's what they all say," he panted. "Old Tate's crazy. Old Tate won't be able to do nothing. Take his hogs. Don't matter if his earmark's on 'em. Take 'em. Kill 'em. Kill him—"

He was bawling now like a child in a tantrum, and he came at them in a rush. Corsica pushed Troy back with her hands held out wide. They knocked a chair over and her father almost fell. Then they were up against the mantel. Tate stumbled on the fallen chair, caught at it to keep from falling.

"Please, Tate, what do you hope to gain, he's an old man—"

"Ain't no use. Get out of the way, Corsica."

She spread her arms out backward around Troy, her whole body against his trembling frame. "Please, don't—"

"Then I'll kill you too," he gasped, and straightened up from the chair and came at her with the knife upraised.

"Tate—"

The shot smashed her cry. Tate's body fell heavily against her, and slid down, sprawling across the floor.

Corsica's eyes lifted slowly from his

body, till they found Phil, standing in the doorway, with the smoking gun in his hand. Phil took a heavy breath, looking at his sister.

"What'd I walk in on?" he asked.

"Phil." His name left her feebly. "Oh, Phil—"

Then she was shaking in reaction, and staggering across Tate to drop in the wing chair. The tears began to squeeze soundlessly from her eyes. She heard Phil move across the room.

"It's all right, Corsica. Whatever it was, it's all over."

She caught his hand, staring up at him. "I sent Dee down to make Rouquette take him to Mock's," she said.

"I haven't been at Mock's in a long time," he told her wearily. "There's no time to waste, Corsica. I don't think I can go any farther. I was riding to get the sheriff. I almost killed my horse, and stopped here for a fresh one. You've got to get to Sheridan somehow and tell him Kenny is down at Roman's. They're going to kill Kenny. Roman is the head of the hide rustlers and Kenny has found it all out—"

He broke off, turning toward the door. Corsica had been so intent upon what Phil was saying that she had not heard Sheridan come in. The sheriff made a tall, stooped shape in the doorway.

"We was on Tate's trail," he said, pursing his lips. "Looks like we come too late."

"Did you hear what I said?" Phil asked.

"Most of it," said Sheridan. He went over to Tate and hunkered down be-

side him, rolling him over. "Dead. Guess that's the best way."

Phil leaned forward in a weak anger. "Sheriff, you have no time to waste. When did Roman leave you?"

"About an hour ago," Sheridan said. "We lost sign of those rustlers in the Big Thicket, but we picked up fresh sign of Tate and his hogs. We'd already tried to get Tate at his shack yesterday evening, but he got away."

"If you left Roman an hour ago, he couldn't have gotten to his place yet," Phil said. "Please, Sheridan, won't you take my word and try to save Kenny?"

Sheridan hitched at his cartridge belt. "Sure, Phil. We'll go."

Corsica rose. "I'll go with you."

"Now, Corsica," Sheridan said. "You can't make a ride like that. We'll be pushing for all we're worth."

"You start ahead," she said. "I'll get my habit on. My horse will pick you up. Phil can stay with Dad."

"Nobody has to stay with me," said Troy. He went around Tate without seeing him and walked shakily to the door. "Tell your ma I'm getting my gear." He turned and smiled vaguely at them. "It'll be a good night to work that new stud of mine."

Chapter Seventeen

All Laced Up

"LET'S turn through this way," Agate Ayers said.

They rounded the tip of a dune, tousled with pickle-grass, and walked down the edge of stagnant water that filled the trough. Blacklaws was thinking that he couldn't let them do this without trying something. Even though he knew it would be useless.

"This way, now, *M'sieu*."

The trail turned off the arm of water into the sandy bottom between two more dunes. Instead of following the wagon road, they had cut off onto a footpath that led more directly to the pier.

"Through here now."

Another turn, into another trough between dunes, bringing them into direct sight of the surf, with its roar no longer muffled by intervening land. Blacklaws was halfway through when he thought he heard another faint sound somewhere. He could not be sure. They were almost to the end of these dunes when Mock spoke from behind.

"Hold it, Sallier, and drop your guns. I've got seventeen of my own cutters looking down your briskets."

Blacklaws stopped and wheeled. Surprise still left Agate's mouth open. Sallier's narrow black head was halfway turned. At the other end of the dunes Blacklaws saw Mock, a drunken grin spread into his greasy cheeks. Agate's gun had been holstered, and he pulled it out to drop it. Sallier finally let his go from his hand, intense anger whitening his face.

"Get their cutters and hurry up, Kenny," Mock said. "Roman stepped out a minute and gave me a chance to leave. He must have found I'm gone by now. Where's your horse?"

Blacklaws was already scooping up Sallier's gun. "Back across the road in those trees."

"Come on, then. We'll go that way."

Blacklaws got Agate's gun and dropped it in his holster and then ran for Mock. The bowlegged man turned and splashed knee-deep into an arm of the lagoon. Blacklaws ran through reeds

and pickle-grass and into the water after him. He flung a look back to see Sallier cutting across the top of the dune toward the pens. Agate had his hands cupped to his mouth and was calling.

"Roman, they're getting away, Mock got Blacklaws away from us—"

The labyrinth of grassed-over dunes closed around Blacklaws and Mock. They ran down an aisle between ridges of sand till a third dune blocked them off. They turned down the flank of this dune, coming to more water, slogging through, emerging with the ooze splashing off them. They followed this zigzag path through another series of troughs. Instead of turning aside from the next dune that flung itself across their way, Mock scrambled right up its side. He was at the top when a shout came from somewhere beyond, and the sharp crack of a gun.

Mock's breath left him in a gasp of pain. He remained sky-lighted above Blacklaws another moment. Then he pitched off on the other side.

Blacklaws saw that the dune petered out ten yards to his right, leaving an opening between it and the next hump of sand. He ran down that way, boots sinking deep, till he reached its end. Then he crouched against the sandy slope and worked around the tip till he could see down the trough on the other side.

This was where Mock should have tumbled. But he was not in sight. There was a trail of blood in the sand. It led through an opening between two other dunes.

That's not the road, thought Blacklaws. *He's trying to lead them away from me with that trail of blood.*

"Deff?" called Roman. It was so near it shocked Blacklaws. "Deff, where are you?" he called again.

"Over here toward the pens. We got him between us. Sallier's coming in from the beach side. He went to the shed for another gun, I think."

"I put Ernie and Peele in the timber across the road," said Roman. "He won't make it over there."

"Roman?" It was Agate's voice, from farther off. "Where are you? I haven't got a gun."

"Over this way." It was Deff who answered. "You can have my six-gun. I've got my Ward-Burton. We hit Mock."

"Hear that, Kenny?" shouted Roman. "You're all alone now. We've got you pinched off. Come on out."

The hell with you, Roman.

"Come on out, Kenny. We'll talk it over."

The hell you will.

Blacklaws saw how exposed he was here. Behind him he caught sight of a dead-end trough. That would be his best chance. He could make his stand with his back at the dead end. He worked his way through deep sand to the dry gulch between dunes, and to its end, where it backed into the box-end. Then he stood there, his clothes wet with sweat, the wind-blown sand grimy on his face.

Sallier appeared suddenly in the open end of the trough. He whirled with sight of Blacklaws, surprise making a gaping hole of his mouth. Blacklaws fired before the Creole could. It knocked dust from Sallier's shirt across his belly and pushed him backward like a sharp blow. He thrust one leg behind to keep from falling and tried to line up his gun again. Blacklaws fired a second time. This time the dust kicked out of the Creole's chest, and he pitched over backward into the sand.

Roman's shout broke out: "Somebody's got him over here, Agate—"

He came up over the top of the dune like a charging bull, right above Blacklaws. Blacklaws had to flop onto his back against the slope and shoot directly above his head. It struck Roman full in his great belly, jerking him forward so hard his own bullet drove into sand above Blacklaws's head. The sand spewed into Blacklaws's eyes, blinding him. He fired the second time with his eyes squinted tight, unable to see Roman. He heard the man grunt, and then the immense weight of him crashed down on top of Blacklaws.

It tore Blacklaws away from the slope and twisted him around to roll into the bottom of the trough with Roman on top. It knocked all the wind out of him, and he lay there a moment gasping for air. He tried to squirm out from beneath Roman's great deadweight. His right arm was still pinned against his side, and the gun with it, when Agate appeared at the open end of the trough. He had Deff's six-shooter, and raised it with sight of Blacklaws.

At the same time, Mock appeared over the top of the dunes at the dead-end of the trough. His gun made a smashing sound. It spun Agate around and spilled him back against the slope of the dune. He lay sprawled there against the pickle-grass, staring at the gun that had been knocked six feet from him.

"Don't do it," Mock said. "I never miss when I'm drunk."

Agate slid down to a sitting position, grabbing his bloody right shoulder, spitting disgustedly. "Ain't that a sack of hell?"

Mock slid down into the trough, grinning broadly. "Guess they thought I cashed in my chips when they saw me take the dive. I figured it was best to let them go on believing that. It only hit me in the calf. Never saw so much blood."

"Deff's still around with those other two," said Blacklaws, out from beneath Roman now.

"Let's drag the corpse up on top," Mock told him. "Maybe it'll take the tucker out of them."

It was heavy labor to get the immense body on top of the hump. Then, leaving him sprawled there, they slid back down, and Blacklaws called out.

"Deff? Roman's dead."

"The hell you say."

"On top of the dune. Stand up and take a look. We won't shoot."

They couldn't see him stand up. The long silence was eloquent. Mock wiped his mouth.

"They aren't the kind to stick when the game's over like that. They'll be lighting a shuck now. Do you care?"

"We know who they are. They'll be picked up sooner or later." Blacklaws turned to Mock. "Maybe you'd better do the same thing."

Mock's eyebrows raised. "You wouldn't let the leader get away?"

"The leader?"

Mock made a disgusted motion toward Roman. "He was just the front. I was the main wheel. This isn't my only packery. I got 'em strung all the way from here—"

"Sure, sure, a thousand hides and a hundred tons of lard a day."

"You don't believe me?"

"I don't think you ever rustled a hide in your life. You figured out I was hunting for the rustlers when you found me on *Cheniere Dominique*. If you'd been with Roman, you'd have told him then. He didn't know a thing about it. He was surprised as a cow

with a pink calf when he came in and found out I was a cattle dick today."

"Kenny—"

"You just knew Phil wouldn't be safe at home. You brought him down here that day Sheridan began getting close. Roman gave you the choice of getting fed to the sharks or working with them."

A hurt look filled Mock's dissolute face. "Why will nobody ever believe me?"

"I believe you. I'll have to tell Sheridan I had the biggest hide rustler of them all right in my hands, and he got away. My arm was so numb from being pinned under Roman I couldn't get my gun out in time when you skeeddaddled. Now buy that trunk, you damn old scalawag. If Phil rode for the sheriff they'll be here soon."

Mock shook his head sadly and walked to the end of the trough. Here he stopped, looking back at Blacklaws, and the bland grin broke across his face.

"Warbag all laced up, Kenny?"

"All laced up, Mock."

After the man's squat, bowlegged figure had disappeared amid the dunes, Blacklaws took Agate up to the house. He got Tar Baby from the timber, and led her up the road, Agate marching in front. It was night now, and Blacklaws lit the hog-fat candles on the mantel and sideboards and tended to Agate's arm.

Sheridan and Corsica and the others came up to the porch with a great stamping of horses and calling, and Blacklaws answered them. Corsica was the first to come bursting into the room, filmed with dust and beaten down by the ride, but glowing with a great relief at sight of him.

"There's a cut of Dollar Sign stuff down in the pens," Blacklaws told Sheridan. "It ought to constitute the evidence you want. Roman and Sallier are down there dead. The rest got away but I can give you their names."

"I'll leave Cameron here with Agate, and go down and take a look," Sheridan said.

Light from the windows cast lemon rectangles across the flagstones of the porch. Blacklaws led Corsica through these to the cool shadows beyond. She came into his arms with a long sighing sound. The feel of her body against him was ripeness and excitement and fulfillment all in one.

"I was riding up to tell you something when this broke," he said, at last.

"I saw Quintin." Her voice was muffled against his chest. "He was leaving."

Blacklaws was silent for a moment. "I guess that's the best way, isn't it? That's what I wanted to tell you, Corsica."

"I know—" she lifted her face to his, voice swelling eagerly— "You're free now, Kenny. You don't have to be afraid of what you feel again."

"No," he said. "Never again."

Her lips were cool again his, at first. Then they gained warmth and passion, and though he had been back in the land of his birth for many weeks, only now did he truly feel that he had come home. THE END

LUKE MACCAMERON *learns that even a man who has discovered a gold mine and won the woman he loves may still stand in desperate need of friendship. First publication.*

THE LITTLE GIANT

By James Charles Lynch

TEN miles north of Silver, the broad State Highway lifts over the Indian Hills and drops down the other side to thriving MacCameron City. Here the modern trace splits away from the old stagecoach route, which had to hug the hills for want of water, and begins a straight, hundred-and-ten-mile traverse across the barren desert. In the days when the stages changed horses at Jack Kinney's Barn, MacCameron City was known as Coyote Wells.

After stumbling upon the rich gold-bearing vein and tracing it out, Luke MacCameron seated himself upon the hillside and stared down at the short streets and weathered buildings of Coyote Wells. Less than a month ago he had walked into the Wells, broke and hungry and looking for work. Now, though standing on the threshold of fabulous wealth, he considered finding the gold the lesser of the two miracles that had happened to him this day. When he had dropped into her place for breakfast, before walking out into the hills, Jenny Andrews had promised to marry him.

Neither a big nor a violent man, MacCameron wanted no trouble, but he

knew this day's luck would cause him plenty, so he waited until the stars came out before he left the hills, then swung a big circle and came back to Coyote Wells from the desert side. The day's oppressive heat still hung between the buildings and rose from the dusty street, magnifying every spoken word and footfall and betraying the secrets of loud-mouthed people. Luke moved in the dust at the edge of the walk to keep himself obscure.

Coming up quietly toward Jack Kinney's Barn, he saw the big bulk of Frank Cody, the county sheriff, and the equally giant stature of Jack Kinney, silhouetted against the lantern-lit door of the building. He stopped and stood still.

"I don't know anything about MacCameron," Kinney said. "I haven't seen him around today. What's he done?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," said Cody. "You give him the day off and he disappears."

"Nothing to that," mused Kinney.

"I'm not so sure," said Cody heavily. "He disappears, and Jenny Andrews closes her restaurant. That means something to me. MacCameron's been hanging around there a lot since he drifted in here. If he's taken her out someplace, I'll kill him."

"I don't think there's anything to worry about there," said Kinney. "Jenny's a might pretty woman, but she's smart and sensible. It's my judgment that with you wanting her, she wouldn't pick on some bum who drifted in here looking for barn work."

"All women," said Cody, "are fools. Once they get an idea in their heads about what it is they want, they put that idea inside the first sly-talking gent who comes along and then think they discovered it in him. Jenny keeps telling me she wants a man who'll do right by her, somebody with gumption. Where does MacCameron fit in there?"

"I don't know," said Kinney. "He's not a man you'd look at twice, but it's funny the way he has with animals. They like him."

"Well, I don't like him," flared Cody. "I never did. And I'd just as soon not see him around any more."

After a long silence, Kinney said, "All right, Frank. I'll let him go."

"If I find him with Jenny," said Cody, "I'll save you that trouble." Then he went on up the street, a coarse and brutal man who turned quickly to violence when he could not have his own way otherwise.

MacCameron reached into his pockets and dug out the chunk of picture ore he had kicked from the outcrop of the gold vein he had found. The rotting quartz was shot with threads of pure gold—the claim would be worth millions. Waiting until Cody was a block away, Luke walked on up to Jack Kinney.

The big man looked at him and said, "Luke, I've been figuring about things, today, and I guess I'll have to let you go until business picks up. Not that there's anything wrong with your work, you understand, it's just—"

"I heard you talking to him," said Luke, and when embarrassment came to play uneasily in the deep creases of Kinney's face: "If I were as big a man as you, Jack, no one would tell me how to run my business."

Kinney shifted his weight uneasily. "You're new around here or you wouldn't say that. I licked Cody twice when we were kids and I could do it again. He'd like to see me try it, too, wearing that gun and that star the way he does. And there's more to it than

that. There's that gang he keeps around him, Hutchin and Quinn and Wallaby. If a man was to slap Cody around, he'd have to take on all of them. If I were you, Luke, I'd leave town. Even if Cody is wrong about Jenny, he's got you picked out."

"I guess that would be best," admitted Luke, at last. "Would you let me have a good team and rig to ride out in, Jack? If you do, you'll never regret it."

Kinney grunted. "You walked in here, didn't you? Any reason you can't walk out?"

"I'm not thinking about myself," said Luke. "I'm thinking about Jenny. Cody's right about her. We're getting married, tomorrow. Jenny's been up to Mrs. Conover's, all day, fixing a dress to get married in."

"Why, you fool!" whispered Jack, when he caught his breath. "He'll kill you!"

"With a good team, we could be a long way from here before morning."

"No!" Kinney was emphatic. "I've got troubles enough." He reached in his pocket and brought out a gold piece and some silver. "Here's the eight dollars I owe you. Now get away from me."

MacCameron put the ore sample back in his pocket. Entering the barn, he picked up his coat and his spare shirt and went out the back way.

Two blocks up he peeked in the back door of Sam Corrigan's saloon and saw that Sam was alone, waiting patiently for the after-supper trade. Lifting the ore sample from his pocket and holding it in his clenched fist, Luke stepped inside.

Corrigan frowned at him and said, "You see Cody?"

"I saw him," said Luke, "but he didn't see me."

"I'd just as soon," hinted Corrigan, "that he didn't find you in here. What's this about Jenny Andrews?" And, when Luke told him, the saloon man cursed.

"In most places," Luke pointed out, "a man has a right to marry a woman, if he wants to, but I guess a man doesn't have any rights in Coyote Wells. I need help, Sam."

"You won't get it from me," Corrigan said. "Not for a deal like that. Cody would find out about it, sooner or later."

Luke held his fist under Corrigan's nose and opened it. "Not even for a million dollars, Sam?" he said.

The Irishman's jaw went slack as he stared. "Where," he whispered, "did you find that?"

"I'll tell you," said Luke, "if you'll round up a fast team and rig and help me get Jenny out of town, tonight."

Corrigan licked his lips and talked to himself, the fears in him warring with his desires. "No!" he finally said, mopping his face. "Even if Cody didn't find out I helped you, he would sure as hell get something on me if I filed on that claim. He and his friends have been laying for something like this. I'm sorry, Luke."

MacCameron dropped the sample back into his pocket and sighed. "Someday," he said, "a man with a little leather in his soul will come along and step on Cody and his friends."

"Whoever does," predicted Corrigan, "can have the county, that I'll guarantee. And I can guarantee what will happen to you, if you marry Jenny Andrews. Don't do it, Luke. Don't do it."

After a moment's thought, Luke said, "I don't mind walking out on a gold mine, but I hate to disappoint Jenny.

So long, Sam."

"So long," said Corrigan. "What's a woman, even a pretty one like Jenny, compared to living awhile and enjoying life?"

Luke stood on the front porch of the saloon, in the dark, smelling and hearing the town and wishing he were a big and gutty man. And standing there, he watched a half dozen riders, led by Bret Allison, a tough, weathered man who ran cattle in the hills, come down the street and turn in at the hitchrack before Corrigan's.

As they swung down, Bret Allison said flatly, "Don't you boys start anything, but don't take anything, either. All of you stick together."

Passing Luke, they looked at him coldly because he was part of the town and they were of a different breed, held together by their own loyalties. When they went on inside, Luke stepped down to the street and walked slowly toward Jenny's place, feeling more alone and lonely than ever.

It was seven o'clock. Jenny had said she would be back by seven and for Luke to come and have supper with her in the restaurant kitchen.

Coming up to her place, he looked in. A lamp burned low on the counter above the money drawer and brighter light came through the cracks around the kitchen door. There was no one in sight.

MacCameron drew a long breath and stepped inside, not even bothering to close the door when he heard the voices coming from the rear.

"I'm going to ask you once more," Frank Cody said heavily. "Where were you and MacCameron? What were you doing?"

Jenny's voice was low and defiant. "I'm going to tell you once more, Frank. It's none of your business. Now get out of here. I hate the sight of you."

"All right," said Cody, and there was the sharp sound of a hard palm striking a soft cheek. "Now we'll start over again. Where were you and MacCameron?"

MacCameron moved down behind the counter. Passing the money drawer, he saw the shiny, nickle-plated pistol Jenny kept on the shelf beneath the till, and snatched it up. He heard two more blows struck before he pushed open the kitchen door and stepped inside.

Jenny Andrews was a small, exquisitely formed woman, usually calm and soft-spoken and quick to smile. Now her glossy black hair was mussed and her blue eyes turned dark with fear and anger. Cody had backed her into the far corner, his left hand at her throat, pinning her, his right hand poised threateningly. Jenny kicked at him and reached for his face with clawed fingers, but Cody's arm was too long —she could not touch him.

MacCameron started toward them and Jenny, looking under the sheriff's arm and seeing him, said, "Luke!" in relief, and warned Cody at the same time.

Cody turned and took a quick step. Completely aroused and seeing Luke with a gun in his hand, the first thing Cody thought of was his own weapon. He grabbed for it and pulled it free and no one could mistake his intentions.

MacCameron watched Cody's action in a detached sort of way, then, at the last instant, raised his own weapon and fired. Cody grunted, astonished. Before he could recover, Luke fired again, as if it were an afterthought. Cody's big body, crashing down, shook the building.

Jenny finally looked up and said wonderingly, "You've killed him. You've killed him, Luke."

"Yes," admitted Luke. "I guess I have."

"I knew you would, if you had to," Jenny whispered. "But you'll have to run, Luke, because of the others. Run until you're safe, then send for me. This is a rotten place, anyway. I'll be glad to get away."

"Even if I got away," said Luke bitterly, "I'll never be safe again. I couldn't let you in for that, Jenny. Don't wait for me."

Jenny drew in a deep breath. "All right," she said, "I won't wait. I'll follow you. I'll find you, too, Luke. I've waited too long for a man like you to come along. What you just did proves everything I've thought about you, too."

Out in the restaurant there was a cautious step and someone called, "Jenny! What's wrong?"

Jenny's eyes lit up and she came tiptoeing toward Luke, whispering, "We're not using our heads. Give me that gun and slip out the back door. No one will ever know that you—"

"No you don't," said Luke, and jammed the weapon under his belt. "I did it and I'll take the blame. Good-by, Jenny." He stepped out the back door then and sprinted down the alley, beginning to feel sick at his stomach.

When he came to the back entrance of Corrigan's saloon, he turned in, wanting to get back to the street. Bret Allison and his men were lined up at the bar, but only Corrigan spoke.

"It's you again," Corrigan said. "I heard a couple of shots and thought maybe you'd run into Frank Cody."

"I did," Luke said. "I found him beating up on Jenny Andrews and I killed him. That was the shooting you heard."

Bret Allison finally broke the long running silence. "That big gray horse at the far end of the rack out there is mine, son. Take it and good luck."

"Wait a minute, Bret," said Corrigan warningly. "Don't buy a piece of this. If you do—"

"Go on, son," urged Allison fiercely. "Take it and get going."

At the edge of town where the stage road turned left along the hills, Luke pulled up a moment. Along that road he would meet people and people had memories. He wanted to leave no trail for Jenny to follow and thus ruin her life because she was loyal. Finally pointing the gray straight out into the desert, he let it go.

Allison's horse was a magnificent animal. It ran the night down and, when the dawn came, was blowing some, but still going strong. With water and rest it would have been as good as new, but there was no water and the need of it made rest impossible. Their only chance was to keep moving.

MacCameron's neck ached from looking back over his shoulder, but in the clear dawn light he saw nothing moving along his back trail. He had traveled a long way, too. The blue lift of the Indian Hills seemed as many miles behind as the distance to the glittering ridges now visible ahead, the landmark that guided him on.

An hour after the sun came up, the heat haze closed in. The Indian Hills vanished, and so did the landmarks ahead.

Sometime after noon, a rock formation rose up in their path and the gray horse moved faster, sensing shade and rest. Rest was necessary now. It had been more than thirty hours since

Luke had stopped moving or thinking and he felt numb. His tongue was already thickening and his lips beginning to crack for want of water. A little while in the shade might do some good.

Close to the rocks and out of the sun, Luke pulled up. And just as he shifted his weight to the left stirrup and started out of the saddle, the rattlesnake struck from a crevice in the rocks, sinking its fangs deep in the gray's belly. The animal reared, screaming, throwing Luke clear, but heavily.

By the time Luke could pull himself together and get up, the gray was down, threshing in agony, bitten a half dozen times. Luke pulled the pistol from his belt and killed the animal, then wasted his energy stoning the infuriated reptile to a pulp.

When he grew calm and could breathe easy again, MacCameron wiped the tears from his eyes and plodded on.

On foot he had not one chance in a million and he knew it, but to try to get away was the best he could do for Jenny Andrews. If they caught him and brought him back to Coyote Wells, there was no telling what Jenny might attempt to do for him, and there was no telling what his paying the penalty for killing Frank Cody might do to her. But if she never saw Luke MacCameron again, she would worry awhile and then turn bitter. Finally, when the bitterness wore away she would feel relieved and, though she would probably never give another man her full trust again, she would at last turn toward someone good and find a little happiness. MacCameron hoped so.

MacCameron could not remember if this was the second or third night. He crawled ahead on hands and knees. Somewhere behind him was a shrub that had not snapped under his weight. It had been elastic and firm, which meant moisture, and there was hope in that.

He entered some kind of a defile and crawled along, suddenly coming upon the bleached bones of long-dead animals. That puzzled him until he came hard up against a blank stone wall and could go no farther. The meaning of the animal skeletons dawned on him then. Animals, using their instincts as he had been using his, had blundered in here looking for water and there was no water. He lost consciousness.

When Luke woke again it was still dark, but reason reinforced his instinct. Feebly, he began to scratch with his fingers, slowly at first, then faster as the ground beneath his clawing hands began to grow damp. When his fingers finally came up, dripping, he lowered his head into the hole and found an inch of muddy water. He sucked it up and dug some more.

At first not much water seeped into the hole, and that was in his favor. But by the time he had drunk his fill and thoroughly saturated himself with moisture, the hole was as deep as his arm was long and held a steady foot of cool water. He had won. For the first time in all of the years he could remember, he had beaten something solidly and well and all the bitter satisfaction he got out of it came from the knowledge that this first victory meant he would never again lay eyes upon the woman he loved. Backing away from the water hole, he pillowed his head on his arms and fell asleep.

MacCameron came awake to the sound of voices and the snort of thirsty horses and knew that all of his trying

had been for nothing. Sick at heart, he lay still and listened, identifying the deep tones of Hutchins and the shriller voice of Quinn, the fat man, both of them the late Sheriff Cody's deputies and friends. The third voice belonged to Wallaby, the town marshal of Coyote Wells. Wallaby, too, had been Cody's man.

Hutchins said, "Drink your bellies full and fill the canteen before you let the horses drink. Good thing MacCameron found this water hole. I was getting worried."

"Should I let him have it now or wake him up first?" asked Quinn.

"You always did tote more blubber than brains," said Hutchins. "How would we get him back if we killed him here?"

"What's so smart about taking him back?" asked Wallaby. "Ain't this place good enough for him?"

"Use your head," said Hutchins. "Suppose we killed him and went back home and said we did. Ever hear of a sheriff making a reputation on what he said he did? Not so you could notice it. And if some of our upright citizens, like that Bret Allison, for instance, thought we were lying and that MacCameron got Frank and got clean away, it might give them some nerve. We have to fetch MacCameron back and hang him where they can see it done. If we don't, we won't last until next election."

"Yeah," said Quinn. "That's right," and Wallaby, also, grumbled his agreement.

MacCameron lay quiet, listening to them suck noisily at the water and wondering what a man had to do to beat the run of Fate. After a while he came to the conclusion that only by dying could he win. When they had filled the canteens and hung them back on their saddle horns, he sat up.

"Well, well," said Hutchins, standing over him. "Have a nice little snooze, did you?" Hutchins was a sardonic man and what he had been through since taking up this long chase had not softened his callous nature.

Luke said, "I've been awake a long time."

"Then you know what you're in for," said Quinn, trying not to move his sun-split lips. Carrying an extra hundred pounds of weight, this ride had been rough on him.

"Taking me back to hang," Luke pointed out, "won't bring back Frank Cody. Nor taking over Cody's office won't make you as rich as I can. I can make you three awfully rich, if you let me stay here."

Quinn and Wallaby laughed, but Hutchins said, "Yeah?"

Luke drew the ore sample from his pocket and held it out in his palm, the pure gold threads shot through the rock glittering in the hard sun. The three hunkered down before him, staring.

"Where did you get that?" Hutchins demanded.

"Why should I tell you," countered Luke, "as long as you're taking me back to hang?"

Hutchins licked his lips. "Don't be a fool, MacCameron. We don't have anything against you, personally. Tell us where you found that and you can write your own ticket."

When the others nodded, Luke smoothed the ground between them and traced out a map and he had no illusions about the outcome. These were greedy men and when they found out the position of the gold vein, they would never take the time to walk him

back. They would kill him.

When Luke was finished, Hutchins said, "Hell, you can see that place from in front of Kinney's Barn."

"It's right in your back yard," said Luke, and waited for them to draw their guns.

Hutchins nodded and pocketed the sample and stood up. "All right, MacCameron," he said. "Fill up with water and we'll get going. Too bad we didn't bring an extra horse for you to ride."

"You're not going to keep your word?" Luke asked, amazed.

"Listen to him," jeered Wallaby. "You think we were born yesterday? How do we know you found that vein where you said you did? Go on. Drink up. It's a long way home."

Luke thought awhile, then slowly shook his head. Liars themselves, these men would not believe the truth. It seemed logical, then, that they might believe a lie.

"Not me," he said. "You won't catch me drinking that water. It's poison. You'll all be dead in twenty-four hours."

"You're crazy!" said Hutchins.

"It's arsenic-poisoned," said Luke quietly. "That's why I didn't drink any. Look at the bones lying around here. That's how you're all going to look in a few days. Now go ahead and kill me, damn you. I've already killed *you*, haven't I, by lying here keeping my mouth shut while you drank?"

Quinn reacted first. "Why you—!" he raged and drew his gun.

Hutchins leaped in and caught the fat man's arm, saying, "Don't be a fool, Quinn! He's lying!"

"He ain't lying!" bellowed Quinn, struggling. "I can feel it already. My belly's starting to ache."

"You drank too much, too fast," Wallaby pointed out, trying to be calm. "You always were a hog. That's why your belly's aching."

"I don't care," shouted Quinn. "Maybe he is lying. But if that water's arsenic-poisoned, then he's going to drink some, same as I did." He started toward Luke. "Go on, damn your eyes. Drink!"

Luke hesitated a second, then said, "I guess that's better than hanging, at that," and started for the water.

Hutchins got in the way and shoved MacCameron back. "No you don't," Hutchins said. "You're not getting away from us that easy." He shouted at the other two, as if to convince himself with his own words. "I tell you he's lying, but we won't take any chances. I'll start for the Wells right now, traveling as fast as I can. I'll get Doc Severn and some boys and lots of good water and come back. Don't let MacCameron drink a drop of that stuff, until we find you, either, in case that gold ain't where he said it was."

Caught up in their own indecision, Wallaby and Quinn said nothing and Hutchins took their silence for agreement. "Don't worry about me," he said, and started for his horse.

Luke watched the uneasiness grow on Quinn and Wallaby as they stared after Hutchins's retreating figure, and another idea came to him. "He'll never come back," he said. "The first thing he'll do is look to see if the gold is where I said it was. He'll find it, all right, so he'll never come back for you, knowing you two will never make it, not with me on foot holding you back. That way he'll have everything for himself."

For a long time, Wallaby and Quinn stared at one another, what Luke had said working in their minds. Then Wallaby leaped toward his horse and Quinn

was right behind him. But instead of climbing into his saddle, Wallaby pulled his rifle from the boot under the stirrup and Quinn did the same thing. Both men knelt down and aimed carefully, because Hutchins was now a long way out.

The roar of the guns washed away and Hutchins twisted in his saddle, as if looking back to see what the shooting was all about. But he knew. He was already dead. He toppled from his horse.

"Imagine Hutch trying to pull that on us," muttered Wallaby.

"Yeah," said Quinn, and then turned to grin at Luke. "Now you can ride too, MacCameron. Ain't that nice?" And then, wheedling, "That water ain't really arsenic-poisoned, is it?"

Luke gave up. "No," he said. "It's not poisoned. Drink all you want."

"You're a liar!" shouted Wallaby. And he knocked Luke down with a wild blow.

By nightfall, the horses, having never been watered, began to falter badly and Wallaby insisted they dismount and walk for a while. Quinn, too heavy for walking, cursed Wallaby monotonously, but finally did as he was told.

All three men suffered from thirst and were further tormented by the water sloshing in the canteens they perversely kept hanging from their saddle horns. Luke suffered the most, for he knew the water was good and they would not let him drink.

Wallaby, stronger and tougher, and more active than Quinn, stepped out in the lead. The fat man ordered Luke to take the middle position while he brought up the rear, puffing and exerting himself to keep up with the fast pace.

After a while, Luke began to lag, letting Wallaby open up a few yards at a time, until the town marshal was almost invisible ahead in the starlight. Then Luke let Quinn overtake him.

"That Wallaby," whispered Luke. "I see his game now. Once he gets far enough ahead to lose us, he'll go on and leave you with me."

For a space of time it seemed as if Quinn was too preoccupied with his own miseries to have heard. Then, suddenly, he dropped the reins of his horse and broke into a lumbering run, dragging free the gun in the holster at his hip. Wallaby never knew what hit him.

"Now," said Quinn, when he had pulled the reins from Wallaby's dead hands, "I got three horses. I can ride one and lead the other two and keep changing. Who says I ain't smart?"

"What about me?" asked Luke. "You going to kill me, too? If you do, you'll never be able to find the gold, Quinn."

"I'll find it," said Quinn, and laughed loudly. "I know you didn't lie about where it was. You're too dumb to lie. But I ain't going to kill you, MacCameron. You're my friend. I'm going to pay you real handsome for telling me about the gold. You wait and see."

While Luke stood there, helpless, Quinn caught up the other horses. Chuckling all the while, he lifted the canteens from the saddle horns and tossed them at Luke's feet.

"There!" shouted Quinn hysterically. "You can't say I ain't fair. You got lots of water and that's what a man needs most on this desert. Lots of good old arsenic-poisoned water!"

Roaring with laughter, the fat man rode away into the night and when the sound of his going finally died away, Luke sat down, dumbfounded. Food he could do without for a while longer

because, all of his life, he had never had too much to eat and was used to going without. But, as Quinn had said, a man on the desert needed water, and now there was plenty of that.

Late the next day, while he still plodded doggedly along the trail Quinn left behind him. Luke noticed the black birds soaring in the sky. Lower and lower they swooped, finally settling to earth at last. Feeling sorry for the fat man, Luke swung a wide circle around the place the birds had come to rest, but he never saw Quinn's trail again.

Motorists, dropping down the Indian Hills into MacCameron City, often stop at Old Sam Corrigan's Hamburger Palace, for a sandwich and a cool drink. And before the travelers start out, they always pause at the big service station run by Jack Kinney's son, to check gas and oil and water against the long haul across the desert. Both the hamburger stand and the gas station do a thriving business, but they are not really gold mines, not like the one on the hill above the town, the great MacCameron-Allison workings.

BALLAD HEROES AND HEROINES—*A Western Quiz*

By Eric Manders

To CATCH the flavor of the Old West in its freshest and most invigorating aspect, go to the innumerable songs and ballads which have grown out of its existence. Comedy, tragedy, adventure, and vital footnotes to history are all to be found ducking in and out between the verses of frontier balladry.

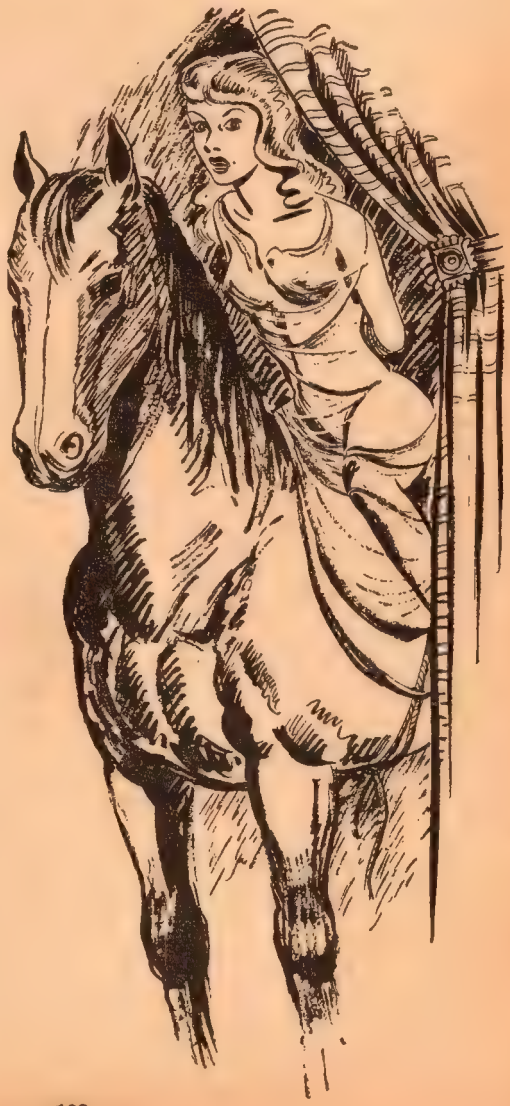
Some of the people listed in the left-hand column below are remembered solely through the minstrelsy recited in their honor, though others of them are historically recorded. The derring-do and personality of each is duly analyzed in a crude form of lyrical narrative—but we don't ask you to r'ar back and sing all umpteen verses: all you have to do is match each one with the correct descriptive passage in the right-hand column (here's a hint: except in one case, each passage is taken from the first verse of the song). Answers on page 125.

1. Sweet Betsy	_____"was a lad who killed many a man"
2. Dan Taylor	_____"a bummer, sure; a relic of bygone days"
3. Anne Breen	_____"did . . . break the jam on Gerry's Rocks"
4. Jesse James	_____"came from Missouri; yes, all the way from Pike"
5. Sam Bass	_____"left his home when but a youth, went a-ranging far away"
6. Joe Bowers	_____"crossed the mountains with her lover Ike"
7. Tom Moore	_____"was a jolly old cuss, a frisky sonuvagun"
8. Little Joe the Wrangler	_____"was born in Indiana, it was his native home"
9. Mustang Gray	_____"from old Kaintuck"
10. Young Munroe	_____"his days with the remuda they are gone"

SHAKESPEARE or "East Lynne," Gilbert and Sullivan or "The Red Right Hand," the rough mining gentry of the Old West ate 'em all up. "There's no business like show business"—as is proved once again, often hilariously, by this ZGWM original fact feature.

STAGE DOOR WEST

By Rafe Gibbs



AS PARADOXICAL as an old maid's thoughts on men—that was show business in the West's early mining camps. Rough and rowdy; regal and refined. Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* in a lodge hall at one camp, Buffalo Bill's *The Red Right Hand; or the First Scalp for Custer* in the plush opera house of another. Next week's bill? Several jumps from *East Lynne*—two ways.

Staged at Piper's Opera House in Virginia City, Nevada, were such events as fights between a bull and a bear, a wildcat and a dog, and a badger and a dog. But Piper's was also the scene of the finest drama and opera performed by greats from New York. One of its managers was considered pretty good. Name of David Belasco. When John

McCullough, the great actor out of Londonderry, played Shakespeare at Piper's the audience didn't want to go home. Hairy-chested, ore-dusted miners stood for ten curtain calls the first night, then in line to purchase leather-bound editions of the Avon bard's complete works.

The same men who staged a first-class riot over possession of a can-can girl's silk garter in Deadwood, South Dakota, sat in silent admiration at *The Mikado*, which played 130 nights in the town. And the mediocre was duly assayed. Commented the drama critic of the *Deadwood Times* on Fanny Price's rendition of *Camille:*

"When she should swell out like a mountain, she sinks in like a gulch."

In a saloon at Cripple Creek, Colorado, a cherubic young thing in pink gown and blue bows who sang "Pretty Peggy" was jeered in such language by some roistering miners that they had to have their teeth rattled by a bouncer named Jack Johnson (he later became world's heavyweight champion). Yet these same miners helped run a "hootchie-kootchie" dancer out of town because she "wasn't refined."

Show business in the strike-it-rich-today, spend-it-tomorrow West was drama in itself. There was nothing anywhere like it. And the mold in which it was cast now lies somewhere out on the desert beside a bleached wagon wheel, a rusted gold pan.

While it lasted, the mining-camp stage offered "variety" in a much broader sense than the usual theatrical meaning of the term. Anything could happen.

In gold-plated Central City, Colorado, a noted actor had to give the greatest performance of his life to save his life. That was Mike Dougherty of the Langrishe troupe. One night in 1862, on the stage of the Montana Theater, he lampooned Pat Casey, local mine operator noted for his poor arithmetic. In a song entitled "Casey's Night Hand," Pat supposedly called down a mine shaft: "How many of yez are there?" "Five" was the reply, and Pat beamed, "Half of yez come up and have a drink."

The real Pat demanded that Mike desist.

"The song," replied Mike, "must go on. My public demands it."

Mike was half right. The town took sides. Half wanted the song to go on, and half wanted it to stop. Some of the miners threatened to give Mike a "bellyful of lead" if he so much as warbled another note of "Casey's Night Hand." Mike's pert and pretty brunette wife begged him to substitute another song, but, when he stepped out on the stage the next night, he was still shaking his head. His friends in the audience roared their approval. Pat's friends sat grimly silent, fingering their guns.

Freckled with perspiration, Mike began to ACT. The play was a comedy, and Mike reached down into every seat for laughs. Both foes and friends were carried away by the performance. Even Pat Casey, third row center, laughed till tears tumbled.

And that was Mike's audience when he began to sing "Casey's Night Hand." The audience whooped with delight. Pat stood on his seat, clapped like a cymbalist. Smiling, Mike bowed his way off the stage, and reached for a bottle of whisky (from which his wife had just gurgled herself a stiff one).

Central City, although now only a faded fragment of its boom days, still capitalizes on the fact that it never has believed in passing up a good show. Central City had its wine, wom-

en, and song of common vintage, but the big attraction was opera.

The people thought so much of a home-spun production of *The Bohemian Girl* in 1877 that they promptly subscribed the money for an opera house, and started the annual festival that rated the town the title "Salzburg of America." Dusted off in 1932 as a tourist attraction, the opera house was reopened with *Camille*, starring Lillian Gish. Except for the war years, it has been going strong every summer since.

The announcement reviving the opera house read:

"The 1932 festival is to be the first of an annual series designed to preserve for the American theater and for the West this remarkable document of a people, who, in the midst of gold, wanted more than gold, and who made a wilderness bloom with the flowers of culture and fine living."

Central City, where many miners brought their families and/or dress suits, was perhaps somewhat of an exception. But actually the reason why the theater flourished so well in the early mining camps was that it afforded a means of escape. When a camp first sprouted on the desert or in a mountain canyon it was often as sterile of beauty as a miner's hat. Matter of fact, it was sometimes downright filthy.

Virginia City, in its first boom year—1860, was that way. To provide shelter, the population of 10,000 literally booted coyotes out of their hillside lairs, threaded together blankets and flour sacks into tents, high-jacked wagons for their meager lumber. Sewage was spewed into the streets—well, those open spaces were called streets. And this, mind you, was the embryo of the city that in a few years was to become so prosperous it would play a major role in paying off the Civil War debt.

No matter how crude at first, the saloons in a camp were generally the most comfortable havens. Maybe the bar was only a sway-backed sluice-box, with a dozen rusty tin cups, a cracked pitcher and a barrel of whisky that reached up and grabbed your throat comprising the rest of the equipment. But it was the magnet for the weary, homesick ones.

As the camps became better established, however, the saloon patrons demanded more for their money. Fixing up the floors so that more than three-legged stools could stand and adding bar-length mirrors were not enough. The men demanded entertainment.

So the saloons imported "hurdy-gurdy" girls. Dressed up as fancy as birthday cakes, the hurdy-gurdy girls were usually the first professional show people of the camps. They danced and sang from rough-board, candle or lamp-lit stages crowded in the ends of saloons. After the show, the girls were expected to visit the patrons in the boxes, to dance with miners whose boots and hair were sometimes both slicked with bear's grease, to drum up a rushing bar business.

Colonel Frank Triplett, noted historian of that day, described a "typical" hurdy-gurdy girl with "eyes bleared by horrible dissipation; her breath reeking with the fumes of the vilest whisky; every trace of her former freshness and beauty gone; her death-like face covered with a grimy mask of white lead and rouge; her form wasted and her voice husky, dancing with some drunken miner or with some companion wretch of the male species, bankrupt in honor, honesty and decency, as utter a wreck as herself, sharing her paltry gains, and a mere libel on

the name of man."

The colonel no doubt saw such an apparition, but he was up the wrong creek when he described her as "typical." Most of the hurdy-gurdies were ladies—period and no quotes. Some married leaders of the camps, and became grandmothers of distinction.

A lot of limb was shown in the dances, but one hurdy-gurdy would wear as much clothes—by actual weight—as a whole chorus of today.

An incident of early Deadwood is cited as forerunner of the burlesque strip-tease. A *Deadwood Times* columnist reported that a match jig dance developed one night between a brace of girls.

"They danced an hour," related the frontier scrivener. "It was a question of endurance with them, and as they became warmed up they began throwing off their surplus toggery. This was kept up until one was barefoot to her ears, and the other was dressed about as much as a boy would be with a pair of suspenders on."

Such a performance, however, was unusual enough to be news. It is not intended to imply that the miners would look at the floor when covering on the stage was scanty. Indeed, as we will see in the development of the legitimate drama in the mining camps, appearances in pink tights were encouraged, but the fact remains that frontier show business—for the most part—was on a surprisingly high plane.

Signs posted backstage forbade any swearing. Some places were so strict as to include in the taboo list even the word "socks." It seems such vaudeville lines as "father threw his socks against the wall and there they stayed" had given the word an unesthetic connotation.

After a mining camp had aged—about one year—it would be visited by traveling tent shows or second-rate troupes which played in makeshift halls from breweries to funeral parlors—rough-hewn "Palaces" known to the trade as "slabs." The performers included Ethiopian serenaders, banjo-beaters, clowns, trapeze performers and magicians, many just stepped off showboats of the Mississippi.

The men of magic were particularly popular. The people who continually dreamed about the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow could be easily sold on the idea that some men had more powers than others.

The Great Zamlock, who toured the west in the Eighties, had a particularly baffling trick. He would fold up a copy of the latest local newspaper, and place it inside a book. Then he would proceed to "read" any item in the folded paper through the cover and pages of the book. The trick was relatively simple for Zamlock, as he had a phenomenal memory, and would simply memorize every line of type in the paper upon his arrival in town.

When he asked members of the audience in Lewiston, Idaho, to name items for him to read, a dentist bobbed up and wanted the details of his advertisement. Zamlock was letter perfect. Next a small boy asked for "the story of the big fish."

Zamlock started to recite:

"The Clearwater River had receded rapidly and left a big sturgeon impounded between Holbrook Island and the City of Lewiston. Mayor Kress and Fred Kroutinger. . . ."

Just then a colored woman arose and started hurrying from the auditorium.

"Wait, madam," called Zamlock. "The show has just begun."

"Don't care," came the over-the-shoulder answer. "De way you sees through things, dis is no place for a decent colored lady with only a calico slip on."

As the gold rolled in and the camps grew to twenty–thirty thousand or more, legitimate theaters were built. To these came the top performers of the East Coast–Thomas R. Keene, Adelina Patti, Madame Modjeska, Jenny Lind, and later, Otis Skinner, Jane Cowl, Guy Gates Post, Robert Mantell.

The camps, too, gave many a famed actor his start. Edwin Booth of the flowing black hair, who was later to be called the "greatest tragic actor of his day," traveled from camp to camp in California astride an uninspired horse, followed by creaking wagons carrying Shakespearean trappings and the other members of his troupe.

Stars were sometimes temperamental about the places in which they played, but there was rarely one who was so temperamental he would not perform in a mining camp at the prices paid. Besides the regular stipend, gold and silver would often be showered on the stage when the performance was outstanding.

Adah Isaacs Menken, queen of the Gaiete in Paris whose admirers forming a line included Dumas, Swinburne and Dickens, gave a pleasing performance at Virginia City in *Mazeppa*. The finale called for the heroine, in a minimum of clothing, to be borne across the stage, lashed to a "wild horse of Tartary." Earlier Mazeppas had insisted on a dummy doing this scene. But not Miss Menken. Clad in form-fitting pink tights, the "black-eyed beauty with the elegant limbs" rode in person. Virginia City folk were so appreciative that they presented her with a bullion bar worth $2,000.

Fanny Buckingham, playing Mazeppa in Leadville, Colorado, the once-famed City of Silver on a Sea of Silver, didn't fare so well when she followed the Menken lead. She couldn't get her special steed into the Denver and Rio Grande's narrow-gauge boxcars, and a local milk-wagon horse had to be substituted. Fanny made her ride draped in gossamer which revealed much Fanny (spelled with or without a capital letter). A miner in the audience who preferred a delayed performance blew a fish horn every time the horse moved, and the animal, thinking it was the usual signal for a delivery of milk, obediently ceased moving. The enraged Fanny was paid off in delighted hooting and hollering.

When the Langrishe troupe played in Deadwood, it received $5,000 a performance. One actress is said to have left nearby Lead, South Dakota, with the night's roulette winnings of a miner in her stocking–$11,500 on the hoof.

When Kate Hayes, "the willowy Swan of Erin" fresh from singing triumphs in Covent Garden, gave a concert in booming Sacramento, California, the seats were pegged at about $5. But The Swan was something special, so some of the better seats were put up at auction. The hammer finally came down on the No. 1 seat at $1,200, with the military company, Sutter's Rifles, making the bid. The company then presented the ticket to Captain John Augustus Sutter, whose boss carpenter, James Marshall, started the whole gold rush business in '48 by finding color at Sutter's Mill near Coloma.

Many entertainers loved to come to Butte, Montana, because, not only was the pay excellent at the beautiful Grand Opera House, but "Uncle Dick"

Sutton, the manager, was always good for a touch. Estimates of money handed out to actors and actresses as loan-gifts by Uncle Dick, who always kept himself in dirty shirts and well-shined suits, go as high as $150,000.

When the advance agent for Actor Kirk LaShelle came to town one day, Uncle Dick asked his famous question:

"Well, son, how much money do you want?"

The agent didn't know about Uncle Dick's general habits, so he answered, "Don't need any, thanks."

Uncle Dick spat a leaf from the unlighted cigar he always carried in his mouth, and stalked and sputtered away. He refused to have any dealings with the agent.

The next year when the agent came through again, he was a wiser man. He asked Uncle Dick for a "century note to tide me over," and got it along with Uncle Dick's friendship.

But probably the manager who most typified the spirit of the theater in the West's early mining camps was John Piper of *the* Piper's Opera House in Virginia City. When the Comstock Lode was producing silver by the bucketful, Piper outdid San Francisco with the shows he brought to his house. Edwin Booth had become famous, and Piper persuaded him to come from New York with his production of *Hamlet*.

Booth was paid handsomely, but he sniffed disdainfully when he discovered there was no basement beneath the stage which could be improvised for a grave. Piper waved his hand, and said, "I'll take care of it."

He had some miners cut a hole in the stage floor and dig out six feet of earth and rock beneath it. When Booth, as Hamlet, leaped into the grave the first night to wrestle with Laertes, he struck solid bedrock, and finished the performance limping.

Dusty, cobwebbed, faded Piper's Opera House still stands today in Virginia City, and some folks say that, when the wind blows through it, you can still hear John Piper chuckling.

COWBOY CALENDAR

By C. Wiles Hallock

My fav'rite day of all the week,
If weather's elegant or bleak,
Is Sunday—when I'm sent to seek
The boss's pretty daughter;
Who mounts her little sorrel mare
And goes a-ridin'—none knows where,
Exceptin' me—and loiters there
Far later than she'd oughter.

My fav'rite week is one in spring,
When meadow-larks commence to sing,
And dawn comes quick, and everything—
Includin' chores—seems new.
With drivin' dogies out to range,
And night-herd hitches for a change,
It don't seem irkysome or strange
To be a buckaroo!

My fav'rite month of all the year
Is February bleak and drear;
A choice which pals considers queer
And ponders plumb perplexed. . . .
Why this bleak month—do *you* inquire?
Because I vurry much admire
The shortest time that kin expire
'Twist *last* payday and *next!*

LONG GONE

By Peter Dawson

THE blast of the locomotive's whistle shrilled back over the rhythmic clanking of the gondola's trucks, and at once Ray Kindred stirred from a wary lethargy, shifting his long length to ease the prod of a .44 Colt's against hip-bone. When the whistle sounded again he came to his knees; and then slowly, with an infinite care, he raised up out of the creosote-stenched pocket among the butt ends of the ties until his pale gray eyes were staring outward.

This was but the second time in over eleven hours he had risked a look anywhere but straight upward from his hiding place. And now he was weighing against a cool apprehension the friendly beckoning of a dusk-blurred pattern of near-by pine slopes.

AIMING TO PULL *a fast one on the sheriff, Ray Kindred fails to allow for the soft spot in his own hardcase make-up. First publication.*

He had caught this freight laboring slowly along a canyon grade in a bleaker, drier country early this morning, and he had sensed no beckoning on taking that first outward look. Then, at midday, the train had been stopped at a way-station and tank along the flats. There had been a prolonged interval of frozen uncertainty for him while a crewman slowly paced the length of the train toward his car. Kindred had waited squatting on his heels, the .44 held idly in hand, until finally

the man tapped the gondola's journal-boxes and went on.

Two sobering possibilities had been in his thoughts constantly throughout the long day; one, that a man catwalking the cars could easily stumble on his hiding place, the other that the train might be stopped and searched at any time. Kindred had accepted these likelihoods stoically and with a customary fatality, though also with a measure of self-disdain; for he had made the concession of lying most of the time with the Colt's drawn and his arm propped idly so that the weapon slanted in line with the upward edges of the ties.

Ignoring drowsiness and thirst had been hardest of all. The thirst he could endure. But each time he briefly dozed he was seeing the eyes again, a pair of blue, kindly eyes with a stare of death creeping into them. And the nightmare would invariably jerk him awake cursing and with a raw temper.

He was trying to put that haunting vision of the eyes from mind now as a rearward glance showed him the caboose almost obscured by the settling darkness, the glow of its lanterns plainly visible. Some of the tautness was leaving his nerves then as he looked ahead. His back straightened in surprise at seeing the scattered lights of a town winking through the lodgepoles, the locomotive already running past a gray-lined clutter of cattle pens at the settlement's outskirts.

An eager, gloating look at once shaped itself on his narrow face. He was thinking of the prospect of buying grub and a horse and saddle—or of stealing them—and then of losing himself in the high country to the north. Now was the moment for deciding whether to stay with the train or leave it.

The choice wasn't difficult, and there was no hesitation in his reaching down for his wide gray hat, beating the dust and cinders from it and then pulling it hard onto his blond head against the rush of smoke-tainted air. He pushed the .44 more snugly into the trough ahead of hip-bone, a hard-fleshed pocket grown calloused over the years of constant use. Then, hunching low, he lifted a leg over the gondola's swaying side.

The freight was slowing jerkily now, and as the first loading-pen came abreast Ray Kindred vaulted out and down. His boots hit the graveled embankment with a force that drove him to his knees, sent him skidding on in a smother of dust and down into a weed patch. He came stiffly erect and took three deliberate steps in on the nearest corral. With his back against the poles he reached down and brushed the sand from his trousers, watching the caboose trundling in on him.

He saw the brakeman's silhouette in the cupola window, saw the man staring straight ahead. A down-lipped and disdainful smile patterned his narrow face. He brought up his right hand, its fingers outspread, and touched nose with thumb in a parting salute as the caboose lanterns went away.

For two full minutes after the rumble of the train had died against the stillness, he stood there hungrily breathing in the cool and pine-scented air, listening, his senses keening the evening, trying to judge it. He caught the yapping of a dog from the direction of town and from somewhere above in the timber a cow's bell toned in a slow, unrhythmic note. A faint breeze whispered from the pine crests. The sounds were peaceful, as friendly as any could be to Ray Kindred. And finally as he walked on along the corrals in the di-

rection of town, his wary instincts had passed a momentary affirmative judgment.

He found a windmill and log trough at the townward end of the pens and there he drank his fill from the trickling feed-pipe. Afterward, he sloshed water on his face and scrubbed away the grime. The feel of beard-stubble along his hollow cheeks made him frown, for he was a vain man. And, thus reminded that he'd left all his possibles in the pouches of the saddle he'd hidden there in the canyon thicket this morning, he was feeling a strong disgust.

It had been a close thing, his jumping the freight, and in his hurry he'd thought only of the bundle of banknotes now bulging the inside pocket of his coat. Looking back upon that crowded half minute, he knew he could easily have taken a few more seconds to get the razor and some other things. The disgust in him now was targeting an uneasy awareness that he'd been close to panic; and panic was a thing he couldn't abide, something he considered as deadly as a bullet to any man who lived so constantly with danger as he had these past years.

When he presently started on along the lane paralleling the tracks, he was thinking chiefly of a shave, of whether he should risk one in a barber shop or wait until later and shave himself with the razor he intended buying along with the other things. He was pondering this minor detail as he followed a turning of the lane and came abruptly to its joining with a road that became the head of the street.

He passed some houses, built of log mostly, and by the time he reached a plank wall fronting the first few stores he had decided that the town held no danger for him, provided he remained inconspicuous, made his purchases and left.

Just then he spotted the red and white pattern of a barber-pole gleaming in front of a lighted window several buildings ahead. Its invitation instantly made him qualify the resolve to avoid giving anyone a close look at him. His pace quickened.

Then the next moment a tall man turned toward him out of a lighted doorway to this side of the barber shop and came on at a slow walk, coat hanging open. And, just as the man was striding beyond the window's glow, a dull gleam of light was reflected from metal along his shirt front.

Ray Kindred caught that gleam and his stride almost broke. But then that same prideful arrogance that invariably froze out any trace of fear in him at moments of real danger carried him on at a casual, easy saunter.

As they passed, the man said pleasantly, "'Evenin'."

Kindred drawled, "It's a good one," and walked straight on. A chill rippled along his spine. He listened to the other's steady boot-tread going away against the planks, listened for any break in it. There was none. Then shortly he came abreast the barber-shop window. He looked in to see the barber alone, sitting in a chair by the wall reading a newspaper in the light of a coal-oil lamp hanging from the ornamental tin ceiling. He turned toward the door.

A deliberate glance back along the walk showed him a tall shape far up the street, still going away. He went on into the shop and let his breath go in a slow sigh of relief as he was closing the door.

The barber said, "How goes it?" and

Kindred only nodded as he shrugged out of his coat.

He eased into the single barber chair and only then spoke: "Shave and a trim."

Most of Ray Kindred's remembered life had involved a crowding of his luck either by ignoring danger or fleeing from it. Tonight he was ignoring it, no longer fleeing. He was ignoring it even this moment, knowing the chance he took in having hung his coat there so openly on the rack by the door with all that money in the pocket, knowing the .44 to be in plain sight at his belt.

The barber had been waiting by the chair, apron over arm. Now he reached over toward Kindred's waist, asking, "Lay it aside for you?"

"No."

That clipped, uncompromising word made the man draw his hand quickly away. Kindred lay back in the chair and crossed his boots on the padded rest, scarcely noticing.

He was lying there under the apron with a hot towel steaming the lather into his face before the barber spoke again. "Rest of the boys come down with you to see the fun?"

"What boys?"

"From up the Buckhorn. From Miller's."

The man waited for a reply. When it didn't come, he went on, "You got the stink of that tie-camp in your clothes, stranger. Not that it ain't a right good smell. Clean like. Always did take to a good whiff of creosote now and then."

"Never hurt a man." Guardedly then, Kindred asked, "What's the fun you mention?"

"The dance. Down at the school, next the Baptist meetin' house. Nesters and homestead folk from Alder Valley mostly. Reed Williams aims to bust it up single-handed. Bill Shepley allows as how Reed had better keep clear."

"Haven't been around long enough for names to mean much." Kindred's scratchy voice was muffled by the towel. "This Reed now. Who's he?"

"Reed Williams. Runs the Brush brand. Alder Valley has been his private bailiwick up to now. Government land or no, he says, no one moves in there. The homesteaders have, right enough, and Reed's been layin' for 'em. Tonight he aims to pay off."

Kindred's interest was lagging, though he asked, "And who's Shepley?"

"Hell, you must've heard of young Bill Shepley even up on the Buckhorn. Sheriff. Was deputy before old Cromer passed on. Good man. But with Reed on the warpath he's liable not to be much of anything for long."

"Think he'll stand up to this Reed?"

"Williams, it is. That Bill will! And a damn' shame, too. Might be the last of him. He runs cattle and he's got him a fine girl all set to marry if he'll only give up the law. She hates his wearin' the badge. But he's mule-stubborn. Says he's obliged to serve out the term as sheriff. And he won't quit so long as Reed Williams crowds these grangers. Looks like real trouble."

"The usual."

Kindred spoke without any real interest, the warmth of the towel and now the strop-slap of the razor at the chair's side lulling him to a deep relaxation. He supposed it must be this Bill Shepley he'd met up the street. The man must be a fool, in the first place for not noticing strangers appearing in town around train time, secondly for backing a bunch of stray farmers against his own kind.

He was sure a fool not to give me the once-over, came Kindred's thought

as the towel was taken away and his face wiped clean and then relathered. He felt almost safe now at this double assurance of the sheriff's poor abilities, so secure that he didn't even open his eyes at the touch of the razor along the side of his face.

The first strokes of the blade were long, unhesitating and clean. Its touch felt good. Abruptly then the barber was saying, "Wasn't the usual that caught up with old Ben Sadler down to Burnt Springs this mornin'."

Kindred's eyes came wide open, that name sawing at his nerves. He warily searched the barber's face for any hint of a hidden emotion or double meaning. There wasn't any he could see. The man was painstakingly watching his razor's upstroke along the underlip.

Kindred waited until the blade was being wiped before asking carefully, "Should I know this Ben Sadler?"

"Reckon not, since Burnt Springs is two hundred mile south." The razor was back again, working under the chin, and as Kindred's awareness of it sharpened he was once more being stared at by those gentle blue eyes, not the barber's but the ones that had haunted his fitful snatches of sleep throughout the day, the ones with the look of death creeping into them.

"Ben's an old-timer from these parts. Rode shotgun for Wells-Fargo till he lost a leg in a smash-up when the Windrock road caved from under his coach. They give him the Burnt Springs office soon as he could hobble 'round again. He's run it ever since. Or did. Got him a busted skull this morning when he come to open up the place."

Kindred waited for more, almost flinching now against the razor's keen touch. When the barber remained silent, he finally asked, "Why would he get a busted skull?"

"For the company money. Why else? They found him layin' along of his open safe, cash box cleaned. What men won't do to lay hands on a dishonest dollar! Beat the b'Jesus out of a crippled old man! God A'mighty!"

There was something to be decided here, and Kindred considered it with the fingers of his right hand inching from the chair arm until they touched the handle of the Colt's under the apron. There was a sudden dryness in his throat. He started to swallow.

The razor left his neck with a jerk. "Brother, you damn' near lost your Adam's apple that time! Get 'er swallowed."

Now Kindred did swallow, telling himself that if the man knew who he was the razor would already have struck deep. Nevertheless, as the silence dragged on and he felt the blade keening along his throat again, he was wishing he hadn't come here. He couldn't keep his hands from knotting, his long frame from holding rigid. It took a real effort to crowd back the urge to sweep aside the apron and run on out into the shielding darkness.

He realized suddenly that he was nearly panicked, and for the second time this day. The thought brought with it a brittle anger. Gradually, it steadied him until his nerves were under control again.

Finally he was calm enough to drawl, "Maybe this Sadler asked for it. You don't place a bet or even call if the deck's stacked against you."

The barber lifted the razor, frowned down at him. "Meanin' what?"

"The old boy could've got cashed in because he was scared. Because he ran or something when he should've just

stood there and let it happen."

"Ben scared? When he's met up with—"

"Or there might have been a iron in the cash box he went for," Kindred cut in, telling himself, *He won't know he's hearing the truth*, as he went on hurriedly, "These hardcases don't want to hurt no one nine times out of ten. If they do, it's because they're crowded into it. Like with old Sadler. He likely lost his head and made some fool try and this bird had to clip him. Yeah, that's it. He lost his head, got in a panic."

"Who's to know?" The barber shrugged, wiped his blade clean and then closed it. He tilted the chair up and rearranged the apron. "Anyway, a good man's gone and the one that did it'll be dodgin' brimstone on into eternity. You say you want a trim?"

"Even it up all around." Kindred sat straighter, right hand resting idly on chair arm again. "Have they caught this hardcase yet?"

"Nope. Shepley got the word along about noon. To watch the railroad, that is. But they ain't at all sure the sidewinder come this way. Seems he'd rightly head off into the desert. There's a world of animals down there he could've stole."

Kindred considered this over quite an interval. Finally, in a tone utterly casual, he said, "Ought to be easy to close up the country. Mountains and all to this end, desert on the south."

"Oh, she's closed tight as a barrel bung a'ready. Ain't hardly a man between here and Alkali but what would gladly spend a week ridin' to square it for Ben if he's called on."

"What's Shepley done at this end?"

The scissors were clicking over Kindred's left ear and he was breathing shallowly as the answer came: "Closed all the pass trails. Got a big crew stoppin' the trains up there. He'll be there hisself, come mornin'. If he's able, if he comes through this trouble with Reed Williams."

Kindred accepted the information stoically, with scarcely a ripple of inner excitement. He was weighing his chances coolly now, knowing them to be far slimmer than he'd realized. But, slim as they were, he would think of something to improve them. Meantime, he was wondering if there was anything more the barber could tell him.

All at once a startling notion made him chuckle softly. Then he was drawling, "Might be interestin' to take a couple days off and tag along with Shepley. Think he could use another man?"

"Sure thing. Want me to speak to him about it?"

"No, I'll look him up myself." As he spoke, Kindred was telling himself, *The joker might fall for it at that.*

His thinking was pretty much on dead center by the time he left the chair, paid, and pulled his coat on. The bulge at the right side of his coat put a friendly pressure against his stringy chest muscles as he closed the door. Once out on the walk again, his instinct sent him into the nearest shadows under the wooden awning fronting the adjoining, darkened store. He was hungry with a real gnawing at his middle. But the risk of showing himself a second time as openly as he had at the barber shop would mean he was putting himself alongside the sheriff in being a fool.

Tobacco was the thing to dull his appetite and now he took a sack of dust from his pocket, rolled a smoke, and lit it with his face toward the store

wall, killing the match quickly. His back was still turned to the street when a voice sounded from across the way:

"Everything all set, Bill?"

"All set."

"You still don't want any help?"

"Not any, thanks."

Kindred faced slowly around, seeing a pair of figures idling at the opposite walk's edge, another coming on past them. He recognized the shape of Bill Shepley in the lone man and, thinking back on his conversation with the barber, a strong and sudden impulse carried him on out across the walk.

He was halfway over the street and trying in his eagerness not to hurry when he called, "Sheriff?"

Shepley stopped, turned slightly to face him as he came on. "Yes?"

Kindred instantly recognized the wary stance the man had taken for exactly what it was, noncommittal at the moment but one that had nicely dispensed with any necessary preliminary move but the upsweep of hand for unlimbering the weapon along his thigh. Kindred enjoyed seeing that equally as much as he did the absolute certainty that his .44 could be lined at Shepley before the man's hand had lifted past holster.

He came on, his stride more deliberate now that he had Shepley's attention. Shortly he ducked under the tie-rail and stood within three strides of the man.

"You don't know me, Sheriff," he said. "But the barber across there tells me you're headed for the hills tonight and could use more help. If you can fix me up with a horse, you got yourself another man."

He felt Shepley's glance probing in at him and was thankful for the shadows. Abruptly the sheriff asked, "You wouldn't be a friend of Reed Williams, would you?"

"Who's Reed Williams?"

"If you are, now's the time to show your stuff," Shepley insisted.

"Man, you got me wrong. Whatever's botherin' you?"

Shepley took that in without any break in his impassive expression. "Where you hail from?"

"Miller's camp up the Buckhorn." Moving his left arm slowly—the left so that his intention would be plainly understood—Kindred raised it and sniffed at the sleeve of his coat. He chuckled. "Can't you smell it on me?"

Shepley's square face lost its hard set. He smiled, all at once reminding Kindred of nothing so much as some carefree young ranch hand. "All right," he drawled, "you're on. Hang around down by the school and you can head out with me after I've finished one more chore. There's a chuck wagon up the pass, so never mind about grub."

He nodded and started on past Kindred. Then as he came abreast he halted abruptly and, almost within arm reach now, leaned over and drew in a breath quite audibly. "That's creosote, right enough," he said. "See you later." And he turned and walked away.

Kindred laughed softly, delightedly at realizing how smoothly his bluff was working. But then he sobered. Shepley might be a fool, an overgrown kid beyond his depth in trying to deal with a situation beyond him, but he was nevertheless a likeable fool. Kindred gave the man a grudging admiration for the positive word that they would be heading out together after he had finished his "one more chore," which must be his meeting with this Reed Williams. He hadn't betrayed by word

or look any concern over the outcome of the meeting.

Yet the spot Shepley was in mattered little to Kindred now as he sauntered on after the younger man. Instead, he was thinking of the strangeness of the circumstances, of this being the first time in his life he had ever depended on a lawman for anything but suspicion or hostility. The incongruity of Shepley having become the means of his salvation filled him with smugness. Shepley would post him at some point along the pass he would be supposed to watch. His appearance with the sheriff would be his passport to the far side of the mountains. *By sunup they'll find me long gone*, he told himself.

"Long gone." He spoke aloud, smiling broadly, liking the sound of the words.

He had gone on a hundred yards past the spot where he had encountered Shepley before he caught the first faint strains of music sounding from far down the street. Shortly the lilt of the tune strengthened until he was walking in time with it. He passed a lighted saloon, aware of several loungers on the walk who scarcely noticed him; only when he was past a feed mill several doors farther on could he forget them. And now up ahead he made out the shadowed outline of a church with its spire thrust sharply against the stars. Beyond, lighted windows came into sight, silhouetting the headstones of a graveyard in front of the church.

The street rails by the lighted building were crowded with saddle horses and the teams of light rigs and wagons. The music was coming from there. This must be the school, the dance.

A picket fence fronted the school lot, joining a head-high locust hedge separating it from the churchyard. Kindred walked in on that fence corner. From there he could see couples moving in the lighted room beyond the windows. He noticed one couple in particular, the man with head thrown back in silent laughter as he gyrated from sight whirling a girl whose dark curls swung outward with the turn.

Kindred was suddenly and powerfully longing for the feel of his arm about a woman's slender waist, any woman's; and in his rancor over the hopelessness of that longing he tried to shut from his hearing the cordant strains of fiddle, concertina, guitar, and mouth-harp.

He realized then that he was standing in plain sight, and he eased on down the line of the locusts into the grassy graveyard. But he went only far enough to put himself in the deep shadows and out of sight of any passers-by. There he squatted on a mounded grave, his back to the high headstone, thus placing himself so that he could look through the thick lower branches of the bushes and keep an eye on the street.

Long gone. The phrase came back to him suddenly, out of nowhere, and as the minutes passed he was idly trying to imagine what it would be like to be free again, free to come and go as he pleased, with money in pocket, and for a time not have to keep his eye and mind so everlastingly on his back trail.

The voices from the other side of the hedge, a man's and a woman's, reached him only as a muted undertone at first. He wasn't quite sure of the first moment he became aware of them, and then he wasn't even curious enough to look toward the back of the lot and try and see who was speaking. He supposed it was a couple courting in the shadows. Then all at once the woman—

her voice sounded like a young girl's—spoke in a choked outburst:

". . . thought it through! You aren't in your right mind!"

"But I am, Laura."

With the man's first plainly audible word, Kindred recognized him. It was Bill Shepley. The sheriff's tone was calm, unruffled, not even remotely the voice of a man afraid. His next words put emphasis to this quality in him as he added, "My head would hang the rest of my life if I stood aside and let Reed make this stick."

There was a moment's silence before the girl spoke again, lower than before, her words miserable, impassioned. "None of this concerns you, Bill. None of it! You have the ranch, you have me. You'll have neither if Reed Williams kills you." Her words jarred Kindred, corded the muscles of his face as his jaw set hard. "Or even if you make an enemy of him."

"There's never been the day when I was afraid of Reed."

"Make him your enemy and we have a burden to bear the rest of our lives," she went on, ignoring his positiveness. "And our children will have it to bear. Can't you look ahead and see what it all means, Bill?"

"That's what I am doing—looking ahead. If I back down to Reed now it'll be to other things later. Alder's big enough for these people and Reed, and more. Let him boot 'em—"

"Then get help, Bill! Call on some of your friends."

"They've offered and I've turned 'em down. Reed Williams is just one man, isn't he?"

"Suppose he doesn't come alone?"

"He will."

Kindred waited out a longer silence now, one that kept him on edge, leaning forward, listening intently. And shortly the girl's voice came once more: "You were never intended to be sheriff, Bill. Let the next sheriff do this after election."

"After Reed's sent all those people on their way, kicked 'em off land that's rightfully theirs? No, honey. No." Shepley's tone was gently ungiving. "It happens I'm the one to stop him. They'd laugh me out of the country if I backed down now."

"Then you're—you're lost, Bill. He'll kill you! As surely as—"

The girl's words laid a shock through Kindred, one that for long seconds numbed him against understanding just why her voice had broken off so suddenly. Then, over his apprehension, he was hearing the echoes of hoof-falls along the street, imagined echoes of real sounds he had ignored some seconds ago in his concentration on catching what was being said.

His glance swung sharply streetward. He saw a pair of riders idly sitting their horses to this near side of the animals at the rails. They were in the light from the windows, looking this way, in the direction out of which Shepley's and the girl's voices had sounded.

At that moment came a cry that echoed Kindred's thought: "You see? He's not alone, Bill!"

"Never mind."

Those quiet words of Shepley's were overlaid with the sound of boots crunching against gravel beyond the hedge. Kindred saw a shadow moving past him on the far side, past him toward the street. And with a sudden foreboding he lunged erect and started on after Shepley.

He reached the fence corner, the cinder walk at the street's edge, and

came around the end of the hedge. He saw Shepley standing there inside the fence not ten feet from him. The glances of the riders swung sharply from the sheriff to him. The light from the windows thinned the shadows here; he could plainly catch the hesitation of the pair at the street's edge now.

His sudden appearance had thrown them off balance. He wanted it that way. He asked, "Which one's Williams, Sheriff?"

"Keep clear of this, stranger." Surprise edged Shepley's tone.

"Which one is he?"

"I'm Williams." It was the stockier of the two, the nearest, who had spoken. He was heavy-bodied, his full face wearing a stubborn, bulldog look as he asked abruptly, "You sidin' Shepley in this?"

"I am."

Kindred could plainly see the effect of his words. The far man, a hawk-faced oldster, now glanced uneasily at Williams, who came straighter in the saddle. Kindred told himself, *They're already licked*, pushing aside an uneasy awareness that neither man appeared particularly ready to drop this and ride away.

That unsettling awareness crowded into him saying, "So now we're even, gents. Who'd care to call the turn?"

Shepley said quickly, "Stranger, this is my—"

"You're wastin' your wind, Sheriff."

Kindred spoke sharply, derisively, for Shepley's words were spoiling the play, weakening it to Reed Williams's advantage. There was still the chance that this pair would back down now that the odds no longer stood in their favor. If it came to a shoot-out, Kindred was ready, confident. Whichever way it went, the all-important thing was to see that Shepley came through this with a whole skin. Never before had the life of another man even remotely mattered to Kindred. Shepley's did now.

He could see that Williams was about to speak. He didn't give the man the chance, saying in a taunting way, "Isn't what you planned on, is it? So now what? Do you play out the hand or fold?"

For several seconds Kindred thought his bluff had carried, thought Shepley was safe. And over those seconds it was as though he stood apart witnessing all this. Then suddenly from that onlooker's viewpoint he was struck by the absurdity of his being here at all, of his risking his neck for a man he didn't even know, didn't care about beyond the using of him.

He understood then that he, not Shepley, was the fool. He was making the same mistake old Ben Sadler had made this morning. He'd let himself be panicked into making a foolish move.

He caught the sudden tightening of Reed Williams's face and instantly knew his bluff hadn't carried. A coolness flowed along his nerves as he sensed the violence about to erupt.

It came unexpectedly. Williams's partner simply lifted his off arm into sight, swinging up a two-barreled shotgun.

Kindred's right hand slashed his coat aside. The moistness of his palm surprised him, for a split-second slowed his draw. A voice inside him cried, *Hell, you're not scared!* and afterward his draw came smoothly, fast.

He saw his bullet smash through the hawk-faced one's jumper. The man buckled at the waist and his shotgun slanted downward. Both barrels thun-

dered at the dirt ahead of Williams's horse.

Williams was moving now as his animal reared. His gun dropped into line uncertainly. At the same instant an explosion alongside made Kindred hesitate. Shepley had thrown his first shot.

Too late he saw Williams untouched, saw the man's weapon settle its swing straight at him. He hurried the squeeze of trigger. He was staring into the rosy-blasting mouth of that other Colt's as his own bucked sharply against his wrist.

A slamming weight hit his abdomen. He was thrown back off-balance into the hedge. He cried out hoarsely in triumph, seeing Williams sagging loosely in the saddle. Yet that fierce exultancy at seeing his second kill was instantly dulled by stark terror. He was falling. He could see the stars wheel from overhead until he was looking straight at them. Their brightness faded. And then his staring eyes saw nothing.

As Williams's frightened animal bolted off into the darkness, Bill Shepley's glance left the two inert shapes sprawled at the street's edge and he stared through the fence at the dead stranger. He heard Laura's quick step coming in behind him. Still, he stood looking down at Kindred.

"Bill! Bill!" He felt Laura's grip on his arm, yet didn't look around at her. Then, in a low, awed voice, she was asking, "Who was he?"

Shepley's head moved from side to side in a slow, baffled way. He sighed wearily, and only then thought to lift the gun hanging in his hand and drop it in its sheath.

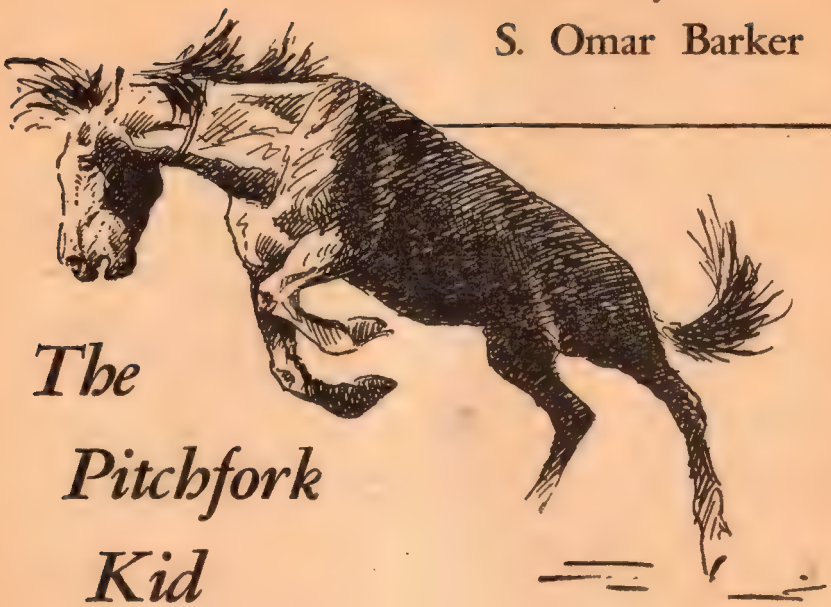
"I'd decided he was the one that killed old Sadler," he said. "Now I'm just not sure who he was, Laura."

Answers to "Ballad Heroes and Heroines" Quiz on page 108

1. "Oh, don't you remember SWEET BETSY from Pike
   Who CROSSED THE BIG MOUNTAINS WITH HER LOVER IKE?"
2. "DAN TAYLOR WAS A JOLLY OLD CUSS, A FRISKY SONUVAGUN,
   He loves to court the maidens, and savvies how it's done."
3. "Come all you men of Arkansas, a tale to you I'll sing
   of ANNIE BREEN FROM OLD KAINTUCK who made the forest ring."
4. "JESSE JAMES WAS A LAD WHO KILLED MANY A MAN,
   He robbed the Glendale train."
5. "SAM BASS WAS BORN IN INDIANA, IT WAS HIS NATIVE HOME,
   And at the age of seventeen young Sam began to roam."
6. "My name is JOE BOWERS, I've got a brother Ike,
   I CAME FROM OLD MISSOURI; YES, ALL THE WAY FROM PIKE."
7. "Well, I'm old TOM MOORE, A BUMMER SURE; A RELIC OF BYGONE DAYS,
   They call me a rummy and a gin-sot too, but what care I for praise?"
8. "Now, it's LITTLE JOE THE WRANGLER, he'll wrangle nevermore,
   HIS DAYS WITH THE REMUDA THEY ARE GONE."
9. "There was once a noble ranger, we called him MUSTANG GRAY,
   He LEFT HIS HOME WHEN BUT A YOUTH, WENT A-RANGING FAR AWAY."
10. "When six Canadian shantyboys DID volunteer to go
    and BREAK THE JAM ON GERRY'S LOCKS with their foreman, YOUNG MUNROE."

By

S. Omar Barker



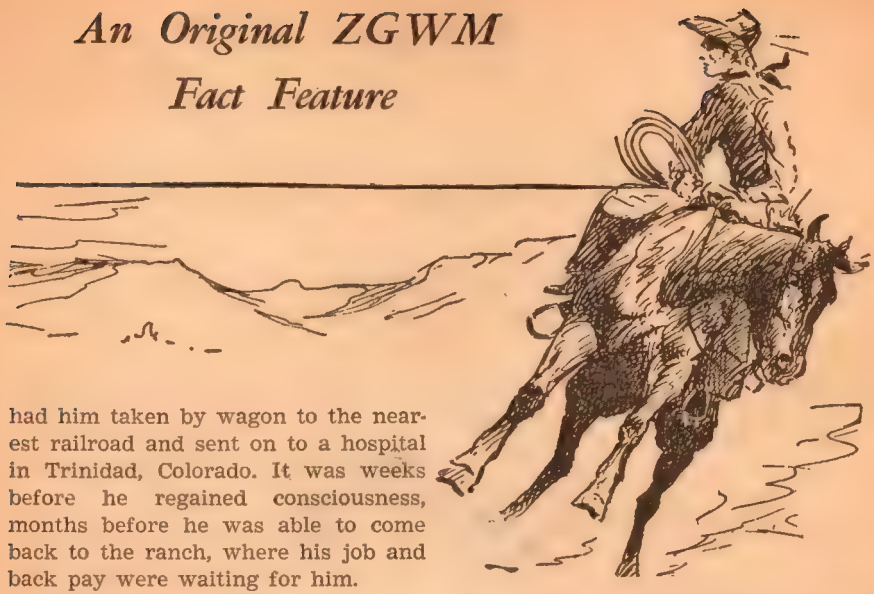
The Pitchfork Kid

A LOT has been written about the old-time cowboy's loyalty to his "brand"—meaning the outfit, large or small, for which he rode. The cowboy's faithfulness to his employer was, and still is, one of the finest traditions of the Western range. But this loyalty was by no means always one-sided, as this brief account of "The Pitchfork Kid" will show.

Never mind his real name. The Pitchfork Kid was an orphan, picked up on the streets of Kansas City by the cowboys of a Matador trail crew about 1896, at the age of about fourteen or fifteen. From that time on until his death the Pitchfork Kid was a Matador hand. The Matador, at that time, was one of the biggest cow outfits in Texas, its owners wealthy men. When the cowboys brought their Kansas City orphan back to the ranch, the range boss promptly put him on the pay roll.

At first he worked at odd jobs around the ranch headquarters, one of which was swamping out stables. This was done with a pitchfork, which may have been where the Pitchfork Kid got his nickname. Soon he moved up from roustabout to driver of the hoodlum wagon, then to horse wrangler, and finally to bronc riding and cow work. While still little more than a kid he became an all-around top hand, with some degree of fame as a rider, and old-timers say he was always good-humored, cheerful, and loyal to the Matador brand.

Then one day a pitching horse fell with him and severely injured his head. Though nobody thought he had a chance to live, the Matador range boss



had him taken by wagon to the nearest railroad and sent on to a hospital in Trinidad, Colorado. It was weeks before he regained consciousness, months before he was able to come back to the ranch, where his job and back pay were waiting for him.

But the injury to his head had seriously affected his mind. Sometimes he seemed fairly normal for a while, then he would have what the cowboys called "one of his crazy spells." Whenever one of these spells was on him, the Pitchfork Kid imagined himself to be abused and persecuted by his fellow cowboys, the range boss, the ranch manager, and even the Matador's owners. "Just plain got mad at everybody," say the old-timers who knew him. These tantrums not only made him hard to get along with, but often seriously interfered with whatever cow work was going on. But none of his fellow cowhands ever resented his bad behavior, and if any new hand ever showed signs of doing so, the Pitchfork Kid's friends quickly set him right. And never did the range boss or ranch manager even so much as hint at firing him.

During his crazy spells, the Pitchfork Kid would often quit and ride off, maybe to work for another outfit awhile, maybe just to drift around the range. Then one day he would turn up on the Matador, apparently well and normal again, and go to work as if he had never been gone. At such times nobody ever questioned him about where he had been or why. And such was the loyalty of the big Matador outfit to one of its unfortunate cowhands that no matter how long the Pitchfork Kid may have been away, his pay never stopped, and his place in the bunkhouse was always waiting for him.

In 1915 the Pitchfork Kid was found dead in a lonely canyon on the upper Matador range, from a hemorrhage of the brain. For some twenty years, during much of which time his services, due to his illness, had been of little value to them, the big Matador Cattle Company had stuck loyally to him—because he was a Matador man. And it was the big Matador outfit that gave the Kansas City orphan who had become "their Pitchfork Kid" a proper and decent burial.

EVEN if you want to quit, there's always that last job to pull—and it may mean the end of the trail. . . .

The Road to Nowhere

By Frank Gruber

TWO THOUSAND men spread across southern Minnesota in a thin line. They beat the forests, they ringed the swamps and they flushed every gully and coulee. They were weary and gaunt. Discouraged. They had been out for weeks.

A man who carried a Winchester .45-.75 and had a Colt's .44 on each thigh cried, with bitter frustration, to a man armed only with a shotgun, "He can't have got through. John Quayle can't have got to his Nowhere again!"

Nowhere.

Four hundred miles to the south, a lean man rode up to a little log cabin. He wore rundown boots, into which were tucked weather-stained broadcloth trousers, a Prince Albert coat, and a shapeless wide-brimmed black hat.

His hair was long and straggly and his sandy beard ragged. He climbed heavily down from his saddle and his pale blue eyes showed a flash of life as he clumped to the doorway of the cabin. He was several feet away when the door opened and a girl was framed in the doorway.

"John!" she said. "Oh, my dear!"

"Jane!" the travel-weary man said. "Lord, but it's good to see you again. To be home."

Her quick eyes saw his condition. Her smooth forehead creased. "Come in, John," she said quickly. "I was just about to have dinner."

He followed her into the cabin. It was poorly furnished but as neat as hard work and scrubbing could make it. There were only two rooms, one a combination kitchen and living-room. Beyond it, separated by a curtained door, was Jane Ware's bedroom. The man called John dropped down on a chair beside an oilcloth-covered table.

Quickly the girl set plates on the table. She brought out cold meat and bread and put a kettle on the stove for coffee. Then she seated herself at the table opposite the man. Making only a pretense of eating, she watched him

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as he wolfed down the food.

She did not talk until he had finished eating. Then she said, "I was worried about you, John."

He looked up at her. "Why, Jane? I've been gone this long before."

"Buying stock, John?"

He seemed to sense something in her tone. "Buying stock?" he repeated the question.

She got up from the table and walked to the stove. She kept her back to him and held her hands over the stove to warm them. "I know, John," she said.

He knew what she meant and went all cold inside. Yet he asked, inanely, "Know what?"

"That you're John Quayle."

He sighed heavily. "When did you find out?"

She turned around. "I think I've always known it," she replied. "But I really became certain that last time—when that express agent in Iowa gave such a good description of you."

He thought over that for a moment, then suddenly his head came up. "You knew then, Jane, and still—?"

"Yes—even now!"

He got up and took a step toward her, but then stopped. "You know that I'm John Quayle and you still feel about me—like you did?"

Her fine eyes did not falter. Quayle's dropped first. He look down at his big hands and said, "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I think—that's for you to decide."

"But you can't marry me, Jane! It wouldn't be fair to you."

"No, it wouldn't. But is there anything fair about love—and life?"

His head came up at that. "Life!" he said. "There's fifty thousand dollars offered for my life! They don't even want me alive, any more. They want me like they got Tommy Mitchell and Fred Collins!"

A shudder ran through her. "I read about—it—in the papers. They said you were wounded, too."

"No. Colby Mitchell got a scratch."

"He got away with you?"

He nodded. "You know him. He—his name is Leo Scanlon around here."

"And yours is John Benson."

He worried the end of his straggly mustache with his teeth. He did not know what to say to this girl who loved him and knew him for what he really was, the most notorious bandit of the day; the most infamous, perhaps, of the century. He had thought of it many times, of course, had rehearsed what to say to her. And now the time had come—and he could say nothing.

She said, "Of course what they say is greatly exaggerated. I know a half dozen times during the past year the papers attributed—things—to you far from here, and you were here all the time."

"Of course," he said lamely. "Every holdup, every robbery—the papers say Quayle and the Mitchells. It's—it's always been that way."

"But Northport—that's true?"

"I haven't seen any papers, but I guess it is true. Tommy Mitchell and Fred Collins were killed. Colby and I—got away. This time."

"This time? What about the next time?"

His face twisted and she exclaimed softly. "I'm sorry, John. I—I shouldn't have said that."

"I deserve it," he said bitterly. "And more. I know what I am, Jane. What I've done. I've lived with myself. Well,

there isn't any more I can say, is there?"

"Nothing. And everything. Why, John? How—?"

His face became bleak with memory. "You know about the Kansas border before the War? I was raised there, Jane. We were fighting the Civil War there five years before the other states. Jim Lane and John Brown—and the others—you know about them. You don't know what they did to some of us during the War. Men who wore your Northern uniforms. They killed my father, flogged my mother, and left me—for dead. Because my brother, Jim, had enlisted in the Confederate Army. I was sixteen. I joined up with Quantrell."

"Quantrell?" she gasped.

"Quantrell and Bloody Bill Anderson. I—I was at Lawrence, Kansas. It was the blackest day Kansas ever saw. In '65 I was nineteen. We were riding to surrender, my brother and I. They cut us down. Jim died and I had four bullets in me. They're in me, still. I—still haven't surrendered."

He didn't have to tell her more. She knew the rest. He had turned bandit; in the years had gathered around him his band.

It was now 1876, and for eleven years the Quayle-Mitchell band had never suffered a reverse—until Northport, in Minnesota.

"You'd better go home, John," Jane Ware said. "Luke Loomis was here yesterday asking if I'd heard from you."

He cleared his throat awkwardly and wet his lips. "I'll ride over, tomorrow."

He walked heavily to the door, opened it, and without looking back went outside. He climbed on his travel-stained horse, wheeled it and rode off.

It was two miles to his farm. It wasn't a very big farm, only forty acres. Luke Loomis and John Quayle ran it. Luke's wife cooked and took care of the white frame house. Luke was a stolid man of forty-five, illiterate and unimaginative. He never asked questions. If John Benson told him he would be gone for a week or two now and then, Luke merely nodded and went about his work. Occasionally John Benson brought home a few horses. It was a farming country. Everybody traded horses. Some men made a business of it. Luke had never owned his own farm, never expected to. His wife was well suited to him.

Luke was working around the house when Quayle rode up. "H'lo, John," he said. "Glad yo're back. The roan mare foaled day before yest'day."

"She did? That's fine, Luke. I must see the colt."

Luke went with him and his eyes lit up with pleasure when Quayle played with the colt. By the time Quayle went into the house Luke's wife had seen his horse and was apprised of his return.

It wasn't until an hour later that Luke Loomis came to him. "Say, John, I almost forgot. There was a man here yest'day asking about you. He came back this morning."

A stranger in Nowhere. John Quayle felt the blood throbbing in his temples. He asked easily, casually, "He say what he wanted?"

"Uh-uh. I asked him but he didn't say."

John Quayle got out his pipe, stuffed it, and smoked for a while. He went outside, browsed about the farmyard, and looked over the stock in the corral behind the barns. After a while he returned to Luke Loomis.

"Luke," he said. "I had a long ride today. Would you mind saddling your

horse and riding over to Leo Scanlon's place? I saw him in town today and he asked me about the roan. Tell him I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll sell."

Leo Scanlon's farm was six miles away. It would be dark before Luke would return and he'd have to have a warmed-over supper. But he didn't mind. He saddled his dun gelding and John Quayle watched him ride off.

The message, of course, didn't make sense. But Colby Mitchell would understand. There was only one message either could send to the other. Whatever the wording of it, it would mean only, *On guard!*

Quayle had eaten at Jane Ware's. He ate again of the big supper Mrs. Loomis cooked.

He ate ravenously. For three weeks he had not eaten cooked food. For eight days he and Colby Mitchell had lived on herbs, raw potatoes, and green corn they had stolen from fields. For ten days they had burrowed into holes, crawled into hollow logs and dozed and shivered by day. At night they had crept through woods and swamps and open fields, on their knees, on their hands, sometimes even on their stomachs. Two thousand men had formed a line of steel and powder and they had got through it.

He slept in his bed that night, between sheets, under blankets. A .44 Colt's Frontier Model was under his pillow, another on a chair beside his bed. A shotgun hung over the door and a Winchester stood in the corner. He slept. Yet had a mouse scurried across the floor he would have been awake.

He was up in the morning with Luke Loomis, helped him with the chores. They were having breakfast when John Quayle asked casually, "You tell Leo Scanlon about the horse?"

"Yeah, he said he might see Ab Colton in Dexter about a horse today."

Quayle nodded. A while later he got out his black gelding and saddled it.

The population of Dexter before the war had been around two hundred. Some of its men hadn't returned, but the natural increase during the eleven years since had more than made up their loss. The population was around two hundred fifty now. Just a short street, with false-fronted store buildings, many of them not even painted.

A stranger in Dexter might just as well have paraded before the stores with a placard announcing the fact. John Quayle bought some tobacco in Kelsey's General Store. Then he crossed the street to the barber shop and had his hair cut and beard trimmed.

He wore his best pair of broadcloth trousers today, the Prince Albert he wore usually only to church on Sundays. His cowhide boots were almost gaudy—for him. He had a cream-colored Stetson hat, not too high-crowned or wide-brimmed.

When he came out of the barber shop the stranger was sitting in the front of the Dexter Hotel and Saloon. He wore a single-breasted suit of dark material and a felt hat. He was clean-shaven except for a mustache. He was whittling on a stick and did not look at Quayle as he passed. Therefore Quayle knew that the stranger was sizing him up.

John Quayle went into the hotel, to the bar. Colby Mitchell was pouring out a drink. "Hello, Benson," he said. "I was hopin' to run into you today. Your man Luke tells me you changed your mind about that roan."

"That's right. She just foaled and I'd rather keep her and the colt. Sorry, Scanlon."

Quayle filled a two-ounce glass and drank half of it. He talked easily with Colby Mitchell until the bartender moved away. Then he said in a low tone, "See the stranger outside?"

Mitchell nodded. "I was going to mention him."

"He was at my place yesterday and the day before, Luke said."

"Oh, that's why you sent Luke over."

"Yes. Anyone know him?"

"Kelsey said he was a drummer. Tinware."

"He's a Pinkerton."

"Wouldn't be surprised. Well, Benson, I'll give you a hundred and thirty-five for the mare and the colt both."

The bartender had moved closer. John Quayle shook his head. "No, I think that colt's going to make a real horse and I got the pasture and the room for him. Guess I'll raise him."

They had another drink apiece, then Colby Mitchell left the saloon. John Quayle walked out a few minutes later. The stranger was still whittling.

Quayle went back to Kelsey's General Store, bought a side of bacon, then came out and mounted a big black gelding. He rode carelessly out of town. Colby Mitchell was waiting for him a mile out of Dexter.

"Shall I get him, John?" he asked.

"What good would that do? That'd just be tipping our hand. The old man with the whiskers up in Chicago probably knows where he's working and if he doesn't make his report there'll be a hundred Pinkertons down here."

"Well—what'll we do?"

"What've we always done?"

"Move on," growled Mitchell. "But I'm getting kind of tired of that. And without Tommy and Fred—it won't be the same."

Quayle rode in brooding silence. After a while he said, "It'll never be the same again, Colby. We've been at it eleven years. Longer than anyone else ever lasted. But we're overdue, Colby. Our time's running short."

Mitchell looked sidewise at Quayle. "And you know John, I've been thinking lately that I could have been well satisfied to raise horses. I like them."

"Luke Loomis is a happier man than I am," said John Quayle. "He knows that he can lie down in a bed tonight. He's pretty sure he'll be alive tomorrow. That—isn't the worst of it, though, Colby. Jane Ware knows."

"You told her?"

"Of course not. She guessed. She's really known for a year. You don't have to worry about her."

"But you do. Yeah—I guess you do."

They rode for a quarter mile without talking. They passed a farmhouse and saw a couple of small children playing. They saw Pete Miley plowing in a field of corn. Neither remarked about it, but each knew that the other envied Pete Miley.

"How you fixed for money?" Colby Mitchell asked.

"I've got about fifty dollars."

"I've got less'n that. We won't have time to sell anything, either. The Pinkerton man is pretty sure and he's probably telegraphing even now."

They talked about it, then they reached the fork in the road where Colby Mitchell went on to the right. John Quayle continued along the left fork for a half mile, then took a tote road to Jane Ware's place. It was Saturday and she wouldn't be at her school.

He found her at her little cabin behind the log schoolhouse. What he saw in her face made John Quayle feel old. "John," she said, "there was a man

here a little while ago."

He stiffened. "How long ago?"

"A half hour. He—was a stranger."

Then there were two, the man in town and this one. Perhaps—there were more. In the woods behind Jane Ware's cabin, in John Quayle's barn or in his fields. The cordon was closing.

He said, "Jane, I'm going."

"Where?"

"I've thought it over. I've thought about it—for years. There's too much money offered for me. Too much publicity. They can't let me live—I'm going to South America, Jane. I'm only thirty and—"

Only thirty? Why, he had been around for so long. It was a hundred years since the war.

"I'm going with you," Jane Ware said. "I've nothing here."

"You can't go—with me," he said. "I—well, I haven't any money." He hadn't wanted to say that to her.

She drew away from him and her eyes burned into him. "You mean, you're going to—once more? For money to get away. Just one more job!"

One more job. She'd known for a year—before Northport—and she hadn't said anything. It hadn't mattered then. But now he knew that she knew. And that made it different.

But it didn't. He was John Quayle. It took money to get to South America the way he and Colby Mitchell had to travel. And they could get money in only one way.

He turned away from her. It had been said and he knew how she felt. And she knew he was John Quayle. He couldn't go down the road to Nowhere without her. He couldn't ride back to Somewhere.

Jane said, her voice choking, "Goodby, John. I'll be waiting in Rio de Janeiro. When you come, if you come!"

She didn't think he would come. She thought there would always be one more job—until he rode into his Northport.

He returned to his farm, but did not unsaddle the gelding. Luke Loomis saw that, but did not comment. John Quayle went inside, got his Winchester, and brought it out to his horse.

He adjusted the saddle scabbard and slipped the big rifle into it. When he was finished Colby Mitchell was riding into the yard and John Quayle said to Luke Loomis, "Goin' on a little trip, again, Luke. Here's some money to keep running for a while." He gave Luke fifty-four dollars, all the money he had in the world. Then he joined Colby Mitchell.

Mitchell had saddlebags behind his saddle, a shotgun across his pommel. "For the Pinkerton," he said.

"There's more than one," said Quayle. "A man was around Jane's school today."

"Damn!" said Colby Mitchell. "That makes it sure then."

"Yes. And Colby—after this job I'm going to South America. Of course, I'd like to have you along."

"South America!" Colby Mitchell showed his teeth in a grin. "They said the country's opening up down there. Well, John, we've gone this far together, I guess we may as well stick."

"That's fine, Colby. And now—I thought we'd ride into Dexter and sell our farms, to Simon Vetch."

Colby Mitchell's eyes widened. "Right here—in Dexter? I'll be damned."

"Our places are worth five thousand. They ought to just about have that much money in Simon Vetch's bank. And—the Pinkertons will hardly be expecting us to pull a job here."

They separated before they reached Dexter. Quayle tied his horse at the rail before Kelsey's General Store. He went into the store and bought a couple of cigars. When he came out, Colby Mitchell was entering the Dexter Hotel and Saloon, across the street.

Quayle walked casually to the bank. He nodded to Adams, the clerk. Simon Vetch looked up from his desk behind the grill and scowled at Quayle. He habitually scowled at everyone.

"Mr. Vetch," said Quayle. "I'd like to talk to you—about a loan on my place."

"What's the matter with the horse business?"

"Too many good horses these days. Folks aren't paying the prices. My place is clear, you know."

"Come on back and sit down."

Quayle walked back behind the partition and seated himself on a rickety chair beside Simon Vetch's desk. "I thought I'd like about five thousand," he said.

Simon Vetch's bulging eyes almost burst from his head. Even Adams, the clerk, looked around. "Five thousand!" gasped Vetch. "Why—why, yo're farm ain't worth more'n a thousand."

"With stock and improvements it's worth three thousand," said Quayle.

"And even if it was, which I ain't admitting, what makes you think you could get a five-thousand-dollar loan on it?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Vetch, Leon Scanlon will throw in his place too."

"That's right," said Colby Mitchell, who had just come into the bank. "And we'll take the money in cash—right now!" He showed his teeth in a cold grin. His hands rested on the butts of his big guns.

"Steady, Adams!" cautioned Quayle.

"What—what is this?" Vetch cried.

"Call it a holdup if you like," said Quayle. "We're calling it a forced sale. We're leaving you our farms—in exchange for your money."

"And hurry, Vetch!" exclaimed Colby Mitchell. "There's someone coming."

Colby drew his guns and John Quayle guessed that it was the Pinkerton man. He whipped out his own right-hand gun and stabbed it at Simon Vetch. "Quick! Open up that cracker box." He gestured toward the iron safe.

Simon Vetch was trembling like a cornstalk in a high wind. "B-Benson!" he chattered. "Are you—serious?"

"What do these guns look like?" snapped John Quayle.

Crash. The window of the bank shattered and the report of a heavy gun rolled in.

Colby Mitchell's gun spat angry reply and Mitchell announced calmly, "I got him."

Up in Minnesota the line was thinner, but it was still there. The men were lean and gaunt and bitter. They scoured the woods, ringed the swamps, and flushed every gully and coulee. Half their number had deserted, gone to their farms and homes. The half still out were desperate. "John Quayle and Colby Mitchell can't have got through!" they insisted.

In Faribault, Tommy Mitchell and Fred Collins lay on slabs, naked as they had come into the world. Curious folk filed past the bodies all day long—and looked at the bullet holes in them.

"Hurry, John!" cried Colby Mitchell. "There's a mob gathered outside."

He was standing by the door now, firing methodically out into the street. Behind the cashier's cage John Quayle was stuffing money into a wheat sack.

Simon Vetch still knelt on the floor beside the safe, perspiration streaming from his face.

"All right, Tommy!" said John Quayle. He ran up to Colby Mitchell, in his left hand the sack of money, in his right his .44. He pushed past Colby, leaped out to the street. A yell went up from the array of shooting men across the street and for an instant the gunfire ceased.

In that moment Quayle reached his horse. There was a loop around the mouth of the wheat sack. He tossed that over the saddle horn and whipped out his left-hand gun.

He wheeled the horse and kneed it half across the street, straight at the Dexter men. The horse had to step across the body of the Pinkerton man.

Men scurried before Quayle, to the shelter of stores. Quayle began firing, more to keep them inside than to hit.

Colby Mitchell's horse was across the street. Protected by John Quayle's guns, he went for it.

He never quite got into the saddle. The Dexter citizens had scurried into stores. But now they had shelter. And clear targets. The fronts of several stores exploded into flame and crashing thunder.

Colby Mitchell, with one foot in a stirrup, jerked and staggered back from his horse. He went down on one knee, gasped horribly, and struggled up to his feet again. John Quayle saw that Colby Mitchell was badly hit and forced his horse to his comrade's side.

Mitchell shook his head at Quayle. "I'm all right, John!" he cried. He proved it by sending a couple of bullets into the windows of the Dexter Saloon and Hotel. Again he attempted to mount his horse. The animal screamed suddenly and plunged away. Colby Mitchell cried out and twitched again at another bullet.

He went down to his knees and was a fair target for every concealed gun. He was drawing the fire away from John Quayle. Quayle could have got away then. But he couldn't ride without Colby Mitchell.

A sob tore at his throat and he turned his horse back to Colby. Mitchell was flat on the ground when Quayle leaped from his gelding. Quayle slammed both of his guns into the holsters and reached for Colby Mitchell.

A giant fist smashed him in the chest and sent him back on his heels. He felt no pain from the blow, even though he knew what had hit him. He gritted his teeth and tugged on Colby. He got him half up and saw that Colby's eyes were open. He was smiling.

"I wouldn't have liked South America, anyway!" he gasped.

John Quayle lifted Colby Mitchell, lifted and could not raise him. Fire seared through his left shoulder and the arm went numb. Colby slid out of his hands to the ground.

And then John Quayle knew that it was the end.

He was on his knees beside Colby Mitchell. His left arm hung limp at his side. His right hand snaked out a gun and he fired into the batwing doors of the saloon from where had come the heaviest gunfire. He pulled the trigger even after the gun was empty.

Then he was down on top of Colby Mitchell's body, trying desperately to hold himself up with his right hand. Off there—that horse—Jane Ware was dismounting—she was running—toward John Quayle.

"*One more job,*" she had said. And then, "*Good-by, John.*"

Good-by.

GAUNT WITH *the* WIND

By Walker A. Tompkins

ABOUT as frequent as a total clips of the sun, some sucker drifts into Apache and sets up everbody at the Bloated Goat Saloon to free drinks. Which accounted for the big crowd which collected when this hombre offn the Tucson stage started slingin' his dinero around liken it was seed corn, at the same time passing out cards which interdooced him as "Prof. Eustace Tummygrumble, Inventor & Philanthropist."

Now amongst those present and accounted for in Curly Bill Grane's barroom that evenin' was Inky McKrimp, editor of the *Weekly Warwhoop*. Inky wasn't takin' advantage of the Perfessor's generosity, however, him having a jug of his homebrewed Essense of Tarantular Juice hooked around his left thumb, like always.

But this here "Inventor & Philanthropist" business starts McKrimp's nose for news to twitchin' like a short-haired hound in a hailstorm. News being plumb seldom in Stirrup County, Arizona.

McKrimp hitches his jenny mule, Queen Cleopatra, to her favorite spot at the brass rail, where she can forage in the spittoon, having developed a craving for old cigar butts. Then the editor perceeds to buttonhole this Prof. Tummygrumble. Theoretic, that is; for this stranger is built belt-high to a tall Injun and his buttonholes are perty well ambushed by the red chin whiskers which dangle plumb to the knee-bags in his fancy striped pants.

"Yo're a philanderpuss, eh?" McKrimp speaks up, hauling out his notebook and the .45 soft-nose bullet he uses for a pencil. "I'm editor of the local noosepaper, Prof. Spunkydumble. Mind tellin' me whar yo're from an' what yore business in Apache is, for next week's issue of the *Warwhoop?*"

The boys grin at this optimistic out-

A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn

THE PROPOSED *"wind wagon" freight line brings high hopes to most of Apache, but only dark suspicionings to Justin Other Smith. A ZGWM original.*

look, figgering Prof. Tummygrumble will be a long while fergot before McKrimp gits around to publishin' another issue of the *Warwhoop*. Turns out they was very wrong. 'Pache won't *ever* fergit Eustace Tummygrumble.

This dude, he glows like Doc Sigmoid Grubb's nose when he's got a jag on, he's that pleased at bein' interviewed by the press.

"Allus glad to accommodate reporters," Tummygrumble allows. "As my card indicates, my occupation is the inventing of various contraptions which I perfect and then turn the profits over for other folks to get rich on. I get my reward in knowing I am a benefactor of mankind."

"Mind labberatin' a mite on how you make other folks rich on yore inventions, Mister Bumpydribble?" McKrimp prods the dude.

Baskin' in all this attention like he is, and having swallered a few drams of Blue Bagpipe to take the kinks out of his tongue, the Perfessor labberates.

"Glad to," he says. "My brain teems with inventive ideas. Because I give my profits to others, I find myself continuously strapped for ready funds to develop my brain children in the manner they should become accustomed to. For instants, my latest invention, the wind-propelled prairie wagon. Now, *there's* a million-dollar idea just begging for a sponsor. Matter of fact, I'm on my way to Albuquerque, New Mex, right now to interest capital in manufacturing these wagons."

The perfessor pauses to let this sink in. The boys all look blank, the inventor's words not making any partikler sense as yet.

"In brief," Tummygrumble continues, "I have cornceived the sensational idea of utilizing the winds to propel a wagon equipped with mast and sails, instead of horses or mules, which re-

quire expensive fodder, harness, and periodic shoeing. The wind is free and, especially in the West, is an inexhaustible commodity. So, why not harness nature's zephyrs to push wheeled vehicles?"

Jim Groot the banker, who is allus on the lookout for chances to clean up a profit for his Stockman's Bank, his eyes taken on a shine which ain't entirely due to the free likker he's imbibed.

"Sounds practical to me, Mister Turkeygobble!" Groot says. "Why, if the wind can shove boats acrost the oceans, I don't see why it couldn't roll a wagon fixed up with sails."

Dyspepsia Dan of the Feedbag Cafe puts in his two centavos' worth as soon as he can wedge a word in lengthwise: "Boys, this man Droopygamble is a genius! Think o' how much cheaper our freight rates would be in the Territory, ifn waggins could be blowed along by the breeze! Mebbe that's how come the old-time overland immigrunts called 'em 'prairie schooners', hey?"

Well, the boys chaw this topic over for a spell and spit it out. Curly Bill Grane finally speaks up from ahint the bar, "When do you aim to try out one of these wind wagons, Perfessor?"

The stranger looks sheepish. "As soon as I can interest some folks in Albuquerque to give me financial backin'," he allows. "I need a Conestoga wagon, and a few bolts o' canvas for sails. Accordin' to my calculations, it'd take a twenty-foot mast to keep a two-ton wagon with a payload from stallin'."

Old Clem Chouder, who runs the Longhorn Saddle Shop, he speaks up excited-like, "Hell, you don't have to go to Alberkirky fer backin', Prof. Dummythimble. I got a old Conestoga out behint my shop I'll denote to the cause. We can go into pardnership."

Tummygrumble thinks this over for a spell. "Okay," he agrees, "I'll except yore kind offer. But why not cut everbody in on this, so's they all git rich? I'll only need fifty bucks or thereabouts."

Well, the Bloated Goat gang goes plumb besmirk, ponyin' up dinero to git in on the ground floor of this money-makin' enterprise. Lawyer Scrounge, the local justice of the peaces, he ain't got any dinero to corntribute, skinflint that he is; but he says his legal sarvices will come in handy to draw up artickles of incorpulation, write a charter for Arizona's pioneer wind-propulsion transport syndicate, and the like of that there.

Durin' a lull in the panymonium, the soft Alabama drawl of Apache's most prominent citizen, the young artist feller name of Justin Other Smith, enters the discussion. "Seems to me, Prof. Tummygrumble," Smith says, "you're goin' to get in a legal jam with the U. S. Pat. Off. if you put this scheme into operation."

Tummygrumble wheels around and faces Smith, scowlin' frosty. "Meanin' what by that remark, my runty friend?" he snaps.

Justin O. swigs down the last of his buttermilk nightcap and says, "Well, I may be mistaken, but it seems to be that a character named Windwagon Thomas beat you to the draw on this matter of a wind-propelled vehicle, Professor. He went so far as to produce a working model of same, and got it duly patented back in Washington, D. C. Or so I seem to recall havin' read someplace."

Well, it gits quiet enough in the barroom to have heard a horny-toad hiccup. Tummygrumble shows signs of

havin' an appleplectic fit, realizin' Smith carries a lot of weight, figgertively speaking at least. Whenever Justin O. Smith puts in his marbles, he usual knows whereof he's talkin' about. The boys' feathers droop for shore, but Perfessor Tummygrumble ain't fazed a mite.

"Our smart-ellick friend is quite correct as far as he goes, but he don't go far enough," Tummygrumble sneers at Smith. "An inventor named Thomas *did* conceive and patent a crude version of a sail-wagon. But it so happens that only this winter I checked into this matter at the Patent Office in Washington, Deceased. I'm happy to assure you gentlemen that the Thomas patent has expired long since and leaves us legally free to develop the basic idea. Thomas's wind wagon was a failure, because where he come from he couldn't depend on enough wind to make his venture commercially fizzable, which we can do in Arizona."

Well, that tooken care of that. When the crowd broke up, Perfessor Tummygrumble trails Justin O. outside, grabs him by the arm, and snarls fierce-like, "You lay off my enterprise, short and ugly, or I'll shoot you so full o' holes you won't even shed rain, savvy? You can't stand in the way of progress."

Smith don't say nothin'. But Tummygrumble obviously didn't know that besides bein' a famous Western artist, Smith is better knowed around Apache as the Paintin' Pistoleer, him being the champeen pistol shot of the Territory.

Tummygrumble insists on working on his invention in strick privacy, away from town. So next day the boys hitch up Clem Chouder's old Conestoga and haul it up the hill to the barn back of the old Snodgrass Mansion where Editor McKrimp lives. Jim Groot the banker is handlin' all the finances, Tummygrumble not touching a red penny of the donations, so nobody can get any ideas about the Perfessor mebbe trying to pull a swindle on 'Pache folks.

It is decided that since most of Apache's grub and supplies is shipped over from Tombstone, that Tombstone is the best terminal for the new-fangled wind wagon to connect with.

Even after the first excitement and the effects of Tummygrumble's free whisky has wore off, everbody had to agree there was usually enough wind blowin' acrost the desert to push a wind-wagon from Apache to Tombstone; but it taken a woman, Jim Groot's wife Hernia, to inquire "How is this corntraption goin' to buck the wind *back* to 'Pache, special if it's loaded with freight, Mr. Stumpycrumble?"

But Perfessor Tummygrumble has got a pat-handy answer to squash that objection of Hernia's. He explains how sea-goin' ships kin sail into the wind by what he describes as "port and starboard tacks."

Sol Fishman, who runs the O. K. Mercantile, he thumbs through his wholesale hardware catalog hasty-like and comes up with the discouragin' word that his jobber don't list port and starboard tacks. "Only the carpet, upholsterin', an' thumb varieties," Sol says. "Where does that leave us, Prof. Gummybumble?"

But Tummygrumble is patient with the iggorance of his stockholders. He explains that when a vessel "tacks" it is zig-zaggin'. Seems a wind hittin' the sail of a ship will thrust it slanchwise agin the wind fer a mile or two, and by reversin' the angle of the sail, or some-

thing, the ship travels another mile at an angle, and so on until it reaches port; leavin' a track so crooked a fork of lightnin' couldn't foller it.

Well, the whole county goes hawg-wild about this scheme. The next Sattidy, Apache is jammed. Everbody lights a shuck up the hill to Inky McKrimp's barn, to see the S.S. (meaning sand-ship) *City of Apache* get christened at a formal ceremony by Tummygrumble hisself, who busts a bottle of McKrimp's Tartantula Juice Essense on the front bolster. This substitute for shampain removed all the varnish and et into the hickory cornsiderable, but these here Conestogas are built rugged and the Essense didn't do no serious damage outside of dissolvin' the king bolt.

The only galoot in town who took a dim view of the entire perceedin's was the Paintin' Pistoleer. He didn't make no bones about the hull scheme bein' lame-brained and loco-foolish.

Justin O. insisted the wagon would bog down in the first patch of sand it come to, so deep a hurricane couldn't budge it, and that the wind might leave a load of perishable freight becalmed for days out in the desert. He also claimed the wind wouldn't no-way be depentable for commercial operation of a freight line with schedules to maintain, ifn it was to compete with the already established mulestring outfits and the railroad.

Ever time Prof. Tummygrumble seen the Paintin' Pistoleer, he'd make some kind of disparagin' remark about the kid, hintin' all sorts of bodily harm if Smith persisted in criticizin' an idea which would make Apache folks rich in no time at all, and Tummygrumble not drawin' a plugged nickel out of the pot.

Strange to say, the Paintin' Pistoleer took this rough talk without sassin' back. Folks got the idea Tummygrumble had buffaloed Smith forty ways from the jack. But while he kept quiet, Smith kept studyin' Tummygrumble, sizin' up the Perfessor as thorough as if Tummygrumble was settin' for a portrait in Smith's studio.

Finally, Smith decides that he's either run acrost the Perfessor someplace before, or has seen a pitcher of him. One night when Sol Fishman was workin' late in the O. K. Mercantile, readin' postcards in his post-office corner, Smith ambles in and gets Sol to braggin' about how his wife Prunelly was goin' to present him with a son and heir come February. While Sol was thus engaged, the Paintin' Pistoleer riffles through his stack of Post-office Department reward bulletins.

One of these posters Smith sneaks into his pocket and later studies careful in his studio upstairs over the Longhorn Saddle Shop. It shows a photygraft of an hombre who robbed a mail train in Montana five-six years back, in company with a bandick named Sam Simms. This hombre's name is Blondy Beegum, accordin' to this blazer, and he excaped from Deer Lodge Penitentiary three year ago, killin' two guards in the process. Both Montana and the governmint have posted fat rewards for the capture of Beegum and Sam Simms.

Now, this Blondy Beegum is smooth-shaved and has straw-yellow hair sheared clost to his noggin. But the description goes on to say he has got a fishhook-shaped scar on one cheekbone, and a greenish-colored mole on his left eyelid.

Bein' an artist, the Paintin' Pistoleer knows a heap about the skull structure

of a man, even one hidin' behind a mattress of dyed whiskers. He sees right off that Blondy Beegum is a dead wringer for his galoot who's passin' hisself off in Arizona as a tumbleweed inventor and philanthropist—besides, Tummygrumble has got that fishhook-shaped scar and the greenish-colored mole on his eyelid!

"I think," Smith says to himself, "this hoax has gone as far as I can let it. I'm glad I make a habit of studyin' all the reward posters when they come out, and that I got a long memory for faces."

Yessir, the Paintin' Pistoleer is really on the peck. He buckles on his famous .32 Colt on a .45 frame and sashays over to the Bloated Goat, only to discover that Tummygrumble ain't there.

But he sees a crack of light in the window of Tummygrumble's room in the Cowboy's Rest Hotel, Guaranteed Bugless, which is kitty-cornert acrost the street. That means the Prof is home.

On his way over to the hotel, Smith has to admit to hisself that there ain't any obvious connection between an excaped convict and a rovin' inventor who don't stand a show to make any dishonest profits offn this wind-wagon brainstorm of his, even if it works, which Smith don't think it will; but there's a skonk in the weedpile somewheres, and he figgers to smoke it out.

Sneakin' upstairs in the hotel, Justin O. stops in front of Tummygrumble's room. He has a squint through a knothole in the wall, and discovers that the Perfessor has company—an ornery-lookin' saddle tramp who drifted into 'Pache a day or so back and is stoppin' over whilst he has Clem Chouder make him a pair of cowboots.

Smith is all set to shoot the lock offn the door and throw his gun on the wind-wagon promotor, when he hears Tummygrumble say in a low voice: "It's all worked out, Sam, and it can't miss. The main thing is for me to keep everbody in town away at the same time, while you tackle movin' that safe."

"Yeah," speaks up the saddle bum, "but emptyin' a hull dang town won't be easy, Blondy."

That "Blondy" really sets Smith's cork to bobbin'.

"I said I got the details all worked out, Sam," Tummygrumble says. "The whole county will turn out to see my wind-wagon take off on its maiden voyage to Tombstone. The wagon's up in a barn behind the Snodgrass Mansion, out of sight of the Wells-Fargo depot."

Sam says dubious-like, "How long can you hold people hitched?"

Smith hears Tummygrumble say, "I can guarantee you an hour, even if the speech-makin' don't last that long. If the wind-wagon don't budge an inch—which it most likely won't—the audience will stick around. You can be halfway to the Mexican border before folks drift back down the hill to town."

Well, the Paintin' Pistoleer don't wait to hear no more. He figgers this ain't the time nor the place for a showdown with them crooks. He's ready to lay odds that the saddle bum is Sam Simms, the mail-train robber.

Durin' the next few days, Smith don't let on nothin' to nobody about his suspicions, not even Sheriff Rimfire Cudd. The Perfessor spends his time workin' behind closed doors on his wind wagon, and Sam Simms keeps by hisself in the Bloated Goat, drinkin' an' passin' time while Clem works on his boots

over in the saddle shop. Smith just watches and waits, patient.

The follerin' Friday, Inky McKrimp's *Weekly Warwhoop* comes out, for the first time in two months, with a big headline sayin' that weather permittin', the unveiling of the S.S. *City of Apache* and its maiden voyage to Tombstone will take place at ten a.m. on Sunday.

By Saturday night, Apache is jammed to overflowin'. Folks has traipsed in from as far off as Phoenix and Santy Fee to witness this marvel of the age. Freight-line mulewhackers tie up their teams at the livery stable and postpone their regular hauls, wantin' to be on hand to see the *City of Apache* set forth on her speed trials to Tombstone and back.

These freighters don't make no secret of bein' nervous. If the wind-wagon idea works, they'll go bankruptured pronto. You can't support mules and hosses agin competition that runs wagons on ozone. No sir.

Well, come Sunday mornin', a big crowd has gathered on the hill overlookin' town. A speaker's platform has been rigged up on the edge of the hill, and everbody is bibbed and tuckered out in their go-to-meetin' best, in honor of the big occasion.

Up on the reviewin' stand is the Ladies' Knittin' & Peach Preserves Society women, roostin' on benches like a bunch of hens. Lawyer Scrounge and Sheriff Rimfire Cudd are up there too, Plato all spruced up in Doc Grubb's black buryin' suit, him being the speaker who will dedicate the S.S. *City of Apache*.

Apache's new munisipple brass band was supposed to pervide music, but couldn't on account of their conductor not showin' up; him being that diehard skeptick, Justin O. Smith. Another galoot who ain't on hand for the wind-wagon's historic debut is the saddle tramp, Sam Simms, who ain't nowhere to be seed.

Well, at 9:45 the barn doors is opened to display the completed wind wagon. The *City of Apache* is a sight to behold. The wagon box, minus its canvas hood, is all decked out with red-white-and-blue bunting, loant by the lodge hall from its Fourth of July fixin's. The mast, which same is an old telegraph pole donated by Lew Pirtle, is painted red and white stripy like Doc Grubb's barber pole. At the top and bottom of this mast, like the letter H layin' sideways, is a pair of cross-arm poles fixed up with ropes.

There is a middlin' stiff wind blowin', whippin' up a right smart sandstorm offn Skillet Desert. Folks keep wettin' their thumbs and spittin' to windward, and eyein' the weathervane on the cupalo of the old Snodgrass Mansion. Ain't ary doubt about it—the trade winds is whompin' on their way to Tombstone and p'ints West today. Everything looks mighty awe-spishus.

The stockholders of the "Desert Breeze Transport Co.," as they call theirselves, put their shoulders to the wagonwheels and roll the S.S. *City of Apache*, minus tongue and whiffletrees, over in front of the reviewin' stand. The front wheels are lined up in the direction of Tombstone. The ground angles downhill a mite, but the boys anchor the wagon solid with rocks ahint both rear wheels, and also in front of the front wheels, so as to keep her hitched durin' the time the ceremonies is goin' on.

The crowd mills in clost, except for a roped-off alley in front of the wagon, which points toward Tombstone. Men, women, kids; cowboys from the north-

county spreads; Chief Ache-in-the-Back and a delegation of his Injun bucks from the Cheery-cow reservation; miners from the Sacatone diggings; even Sheriff Cudd's lunatic brother, Chewie the sheepherder—seems like the entire popoolation of Stirrup County is on hand for this gala event.

A round of cheerin' goes up as a ladder is leant agin the wagon box and Prof. Eustace Tummygrumble climbs up to the driver's seat, which he calls the "captain's bridge." Hunkered down beside him is Inky McKrimp with his jug of brew, going along on this first voyage as repersentative of the Fourth Estate. Whatever that is.

The ropes which will raise the sail—made of tarpaulins sewed together—will be managed by Lew Pirtle and Sol Fishman when the Perfessor gives the signal.

Durin' a lull in the wind, Plato X. Scrounge consults his watch and begins his oratin'. He swole up his chest, strikes a pose like a drunken politician at a rally, and begins:

"Friends, we are gathered hyar today to witness a hysterical occasion which will go thundering down into the annuals of this great commonwealth. Fer the fust time in the recorded drammer o' mankind, the elements will be harnessed to a landbound vehicle and the proud craft which we have christened the S.S. *City of Apache* will set sail—and I use the nautickle term advisedly—acrost yonder desert to its port of call, the snug harbor of our neighborin' metropolis, Tombstone."

Plato X. is drownt out by a firin' of six-guns, Injun yells, squealin' of womenfolks, and clappin' of the assembled multitude.

"At the helm for this momentous epickle voyage across the badlands today," Plato bawls out, "will be the sailwagon's inspired inventor, the distinguished Eustace Runtyfumble—"

Scrounge waits for the applause to taper off, the while Eustace T. stands up and shakes hands with hisself, bowin' and smirkin' at the womenfolks up in the reviewin' stand.

Well, Plato palavers for another good twenty minutes, outlinin' how rich the stockholders will git, perdictin' that the S.S. *City of Apache* will be the forerunner of a mighty fleet of wind-wagons which will spread to the seven corners of the Territory visiting the marts of trade, an armada on wheels which will cut freight rates right to the bone, et cetery.

When Scrounge finally runs down for want of breath, Eustace Tummygrumble looks at his watch and takes over. He grabs aholt of the lever he calls a tiller bar, which same is supposed to steer the wagon over hill and down dale, and hollers for Lew Pirtle and Sol Fishman to h'ist sail.

The blocks and tackles on the top yardarm start creakin'. Up comes the canvas, twenty foot square. The wind ketches it and makes it balloon out as round as Samanthie Coddlewort's bustle, bendin' the mast so's people can really see the wind strainin' its damnedest to start the wagon on its way.

"Git back from them ropes!" warns Tummygrumble, wavin' his arms at the crowd which has narrowed down the safety alley in front of the wagon, tryin' to git a better look. "When my invention starts high-ballin' she'll go like greased lightnin'. I figger we'll average a mile a minute crostin' the desert."

The sail is h'isted now, the wind bellyin' it out tighter than the skin on a tainted sausage. Fishman and Pirtle

dally the ropes to the hind axle, so as to keep the sail aloft durin' the voyage, and all that remains to be done now is to yank out the rocks from ahead of the front wheels, and the *City of Apache*, colors flyin', will be gone with the wind.

Perfessor Tummygrumble hollers, "Shiver my timbers! Weigh the anchors, bos'n! Ahoy, Tombstone—here we come! Gangway!"

Hector Coddlewort and Clem Chouder kick the rocks away from the front wheels, while some kids do likewise to those holdin' the back wheels, which last ain't accordin' to orders. Up on the speakers' platform, Scrounge and Rimfire Cudd and the womenfolks crowd up to the rail, fixin' to shower the departin' vessel with cornfetti. Eustace Tummygrumble and Inky McKrimp brace theirselves for the start of their breakneck voyage, when—

The wind dies off liken it had been shut off at the source. The sail droops as slack an' limp as one of Curly Bill's bar-rags. But the S.S. *City of Apache* starts movin'—yes siree bob!

Her axles start creakin', her wheels begin rollin', slow at first, but gatherin' speed. Only this wind-wagon ain't headin' for Tombstone under sail-power. That Conestoga is rollin' *backwards* toward the reviewin' stand supports, pulled by gravity!

Inky McKrimp has enough sense to jump overboard with his jug, which prob'ly saved him from a cracked skull *and* jug. Because two ticks later that big prairie wagon hits the foundation timbers of the speaker's platform and then two-by-fours split like toothpicks, tumblin' Plato X. Scrounge and Sheriff Rimfire Cudd over the rail to land astraddle of Perfessor Tummygrumble, knockin' him out cold.

Boards fly ever which way as the wagon rolls under the stand. Buntin' rips and the *City of Apache's* main-mast snaps off flush with the wagon box, brushin' Lawyer Scrounge overboard. The reviewin' stand, packed with sixteen hefty members of the Knittin' & Peach Preserves Society, made short work of bustin' that spar.

Rollin' down-grade and pickin' up speed, the wagon shot out from under the back of the reviewin' stand, knockin' the last of its proppin' timbers galley-west. Down comes the whole shebang with a crash, spilling Apache's womenfolk in a caterwaulin' pile on the spot where the big mainsail is spread out on the ground like a picnic tablecloth.

Well, that dismasted wind-wagon raked its hind hub agin the corner post of the Snodgrass Mansion porch, twenty yards away, upsetting Inky McKrimp's whisky still, which blew up like a case of TNT. The S.S. *City of Apache* cruises out of sight behind this cloud of steam, kitin' downhill toward Apache faster than a goosed goat in a greased gutter, the hill bein' steep as a steer's face.

Perfessor Tummygrumble, of course, is unaware of this joyride he's takin'. But Sheriff Rimfire Cudd pokes his chin over the wagon box and the breeze whips his Stetson off. He's plumb petrified with terror as he sees that the wagon, minus a hand at the steerin' bar, is jouncin' downhill like a bobsled, first on its nigh-side wheels and then on t'other, but never on all four 'tonct.

What kept that Conestoga from cartwheelin' end over end, nobody up on the hill can figger out. The wagon hits the bottom of the hill lickety-split, plows into the munisipple garbage dump and plasters Rimfire Cudd under

a mess of rotten cabbage from Dyspepsia Dan's restaurant.

Eruptin' from the garbage dump, the *City of Apache* skidded on some tin cans, jumped a little gully, and smashed through the bob-wire fence surroundin' the boothill cemetery like it wasn't there. It laid low a row of tombstones liken they was dominoes and was a blur of speed when it exploded into Cactus Avenue on the outshirts of town, Rimfire Cudd too scairt to jump for his life.

The wagon bowled over the privy behint the Bloated Goat Saloon like it was a cardboard box. That jerked the front wheels around and deflected the sandship's course by enough compass p'ints to bowl her smack into the rear end of the O. K. Mercantile's feed shed. This buildin' was empty at the time, which was lucky, or the mangled remains of Prof. Tummygrumble and Rimfire Cudd would have been picked out of the wreckage thereof with a blotter.

As 'twas, the rampagin' vehickle shot out the front wall of the feed shed like a bobcat out of a paper sack and hits Main Street hell-for-leather. There was only two witnesses to the S.S. *City of Apache's* arrival in port. One was the Paintin' Pistoleer, who was scrooched down in the alley alongside the Mare's Nest Livery Barn, keepin' a eye on the Wells-Fargo depot.

Justin O. would have been run down, except the wagon hooked off a hind wheel passin' Sol Fishman's hitch rack, which sent it slewin' around in a half-circle. Fixin' to upset, the Conestoga cattypulted Sheriff Cudd tail-over-tin-cup through space to land smack-dab in the middle of the big hoss trough in front of the livery stable.

Rollin' over twict, droppin' Tummygrumble out in the process, the Perfessor's invention had nothin' betwixt it and the far horizon except a buckboard wagon which had been backed up against the Wells-Fargo Express stage office.

A man was standin' in the driver's seat of this buckboard, fixin' to larrup his mule team away from there. That jigger was Sam Simms, the saddle tramp, who was apparently fixin' to leave town without the boots he'd ordered Clem Chouder to make for him.

When Simms seen he wasn't goin' to git his buckboard out of the way in time, he jumps. A shaved clock-tick later, the wind-wagon crashed into his buckboard and tipped it over, thereby enablin' the mules to bust out of harness and hightail it.

Sam Simms picks hisself up and started to vamose likewise, but he didn't git very far. The Paintin' Pistoleer cut down on him with his famous .32 on a .45 frame, partin' the saddle bum's hair for him, which caused Simms to lay down and sleep for a spell.

Justin O. run over to the water trough where Cudd was thrashin' around and fished him out before the sheriff drownt, so that by the time the crowd come pourin' down the hill they found Rimfire busy handcuffin' Eustace Tummygrumble and Sam Simms together.

Folks is plumb puzzled at first, but when Smith showed them the Wells-Fargo safe under the wreckage of the two wagons they begun to smell a rodent.

The Paintin' Pistoleer explains how he happent to discover that Tummygrumble was a desperado on the dodge, and how him and Sam Simms had tim-

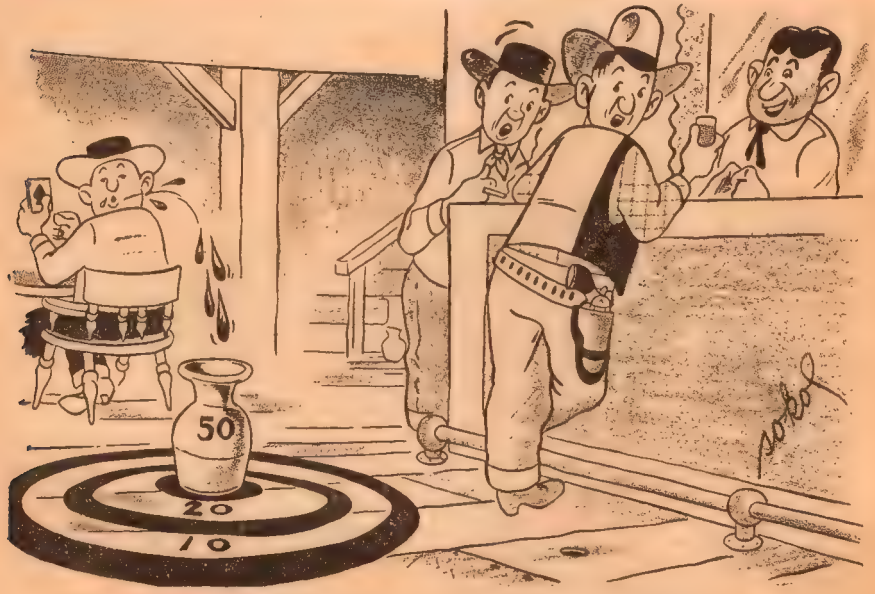
ed the robbery for a week-end when they knowed the Wells-Fargo safe would contain the payroll of the Bonanza Syndicate over at the Sacatone diggin's.

"Sam aimed to drive his buckboard out into the desert a few miles," Justin O. Smith winds up, "and blow open the safe at his leisure. Would have, too, if it hadn't been for the prompt appearance of our courageous and efficient law-enforcement officer. Rimfire Cudd, who always manages to be around when skullduggery is afoot."

"That's right," agrees the sheriff modest-like, "the taxpayers kin count on me bein' around when any skulls are bein' dug."

Well, the Desert Breeze Transport Company stockholders got a substantial return on their investment, even if the wind-wagon scheme did fizzle out at the pay-off. That short-lived corporation declared one dividend, but it was a juicy melon. It cornsisted of the combined rewards payable for the capture of Sam Simms and Blondy Beegum, alias Perfessor Eustace Tummygrumble. As Inky McKrimp said a couple months later in the *Weekly Warwhoop* (him bein' such a clever phrasemaker), "It's a ill wind that don't blow nobody good."

The last Apache seen of Tummygrumble and Simms, they was crossin' the desert to Tombstone on a Conestoga wagon, with a U. S. Marshal chaperonin' 'em. But that wagon wasn't bein' perpelt by no breeze. It was hitched to a span of ordinary run-of-the-mine, garden-variety mules, of Missouri origin.



"Yup—high score ever' week wins a new saddle!"

A GREAT DESTINY *has been predicted for Siena, young chief of the Crows, but its fulfillment means trial and suffering.*

THE GREAT SLAVE

By Zane Grey

A VOICE on the wind whispered to Siena the prophecy of his birth. *A chief is born to save the vanishing tribe of Crows! A hunter to his starving people!*

While he listened, at his feet swept swift waters, the rushing, green-white, thundering Athabasca, spirit-forsaken river; and it rumbled his name and murmured his fate. *Siena! Siena! His bride will rise from a wind kiss on the flowers in the moonlight! A new land calls to the last of the Crows! Northward where the wild goose ends its flight Siena will father a great people!*

So Siena, a hunter of the leafy trails, dreamed his dreams; and at sixteen he was the hope of the remnant of a once powerful tribe, a stripling chief, beautiful as a bronzed autumn god, silent, proud, forever listening to voices on the wind.

To Siena the lore of the woodland came as flight comes to the strong-winged wild fowl. The secrets of the forests were his, and of the rocks and rivers.

He knew how to find the nests of the plover, to call the loon, to net the heron, and spear the fish. He understood the language of the whispering pines. Where the deer came down to drink and the caribou browsed on moss and the white rabbit nibbled in the grass and the bear dug in the logs for grubs —all these he learned; and also when the black flies drove the moose into the water and when the honk of the geese meant the approach of the north wind.

He lived in the woods, with his bow, his net, and his spear. The trees were his brothers. The loon laughed for his

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happiness, the wolf mourned for his sadness. The bold crag above the river, Old Stoneface, heard his step when he climbed there in the twilight. He communed with the stern god of his ancestors and watched the flashing Northern Lights and listened.

From all four corners came his spirit guides with steps of destiny on his trail. On all the four winds breathed voices whispering of his future; loudest of all called the Athabasca, god-forsaken river, murmuring of the bride born of a wind kiss on the flowers in the moonlight.

It was autumn, with the flame of leaf fading, the haze rolling out of the hollows, the lull yielding to moan of coming wind. All the signs of a severe winter were in the hulls of the nuts, in the fur of the foxes, in the flight of waterfowl. Siena was spearing fish for winter store. None so keen of sight as Siena, so swift of arm; and as he was the hope, so he alone was the provider for the starving tribe.

Siena stood to his knees in a brook where it flowed over its gravelly bed into the Athabasca. Poised high was his wooden spear. It glinted downward swift as a shaft of sunlight through the leaves. Then Siena lifted a quivering whitefish and tossed it upon the bank where his mother Ema, with other women of the tribe, sun-dried the fish upon a rock.

Again and again, many times, flashed the spear. The young chief seldom missed his aim. Early frosts on the uplands had driven the fish down to deeper water, and as they came darting over the bright pebbles Siena called them by name.

The oldest squaw could not remember such a run of fish. Ema sang the praises of her son; the other women ceased the hunger chant of the tribe.

Suddenly a hoarse shout pealed out over the waters.

Ema fell in a fright; her companions ran away; Siena leaped upon the bank, clutching his spear. A boat in which were men with white faces drifted down toward him.

"Hal-loa!" again sounded the hoarse cry.

Ema cowered in the grass. Siena saw a waving of white hands; his knees knocked together and he felt himself about to flee. But Siena of the Crows, the savior of a vanishing tribe, must not fly from visible foes.

"Palefaces," he whispered, trembling, yet stood his ground ready to fight for his mother. He remembered stories of an old Indian who had journeyed far to the south and had crossed the trails of the dreaded white men. There stirred in him vague memories of strange Indian runners telling campfire tales of white hunters with weapons of lightning and thunder.

"Naza! Naza!" Siena cast one fleeting glance to the north and a prayer to his god of gods. He believed his spirit would soon be wandering in the shades of the other Indian world.

As the boat beached on the sand Siena saw men lying with pale faces upward to the sky, and voices in an unknown tongue greeted him. The tone was friendly, and he lowered his threatening spear. Then a man came up the bank, his hungry eyes on the pile of fish, and he began to speak haltingly in mingled Cree and Chippewayan language:

"Boy—we're white friends—starving—let us buy fish—trade for fish—we're starving and we have many moons to travel."

"Siena's tribe is poor," replied the

lad; "sometimes they starve too. But Siena will divide his fish and wants no trade."

His mother, seeing the white men intended no evil, came out of her fright and complained bitterly to Siena of his liberality. She spoke of the menacing winter, of the frozen streams, the snowbound forest, the long night of hunger. Siena silenced her and waved the frightened braves and squaws back to their wigwams.

"Siena is young," he said simply; "but he is chief here. If we starve—we starve."

Whereupon he portioned out a half of the fish. The white men built a fire and sat around it feasting like famished wolves around a fallen stag. When they had appeased their hunger they packed the remaining fish in the boat, whistling and singing the while. Then the leader made offer to pay, which Siena refused, though the covetous light in his mother's eyes hurt him sorely.

"Chief," said the leader, "the white man understands; now he offers presents as one chief to another."

Thereupon he proffered bright beads and tinseled trinkets, yards of calico and strips of cloth. Siena accepted with a dignity in marked contrast to the way in which the greedy Ema pounced upon the glittering heap. Next the paleface presented a knife which, drawn from its scabbard, showed a blade that mirrored its brightness in Siena's eyes.

"Chief, your woman complains of a starving tribe," went on the white man. "Are there not many moose and reindeer?"

"Yes. But seldom can Siena creep within range of his arrow."

"A-ha! Siena will starve no more," replied the man, and from the boat he took a long iron tube with a wooden stock.

"What is that?" asked Siena.

"The wonderful shooting stick. Here, boy, watch! See the bark on the campfire. Watch!"

He raised the stick to his shoulder. Then followed a streak of flame, a puff of smoke, a booming report; and the bark of the campfire flew into bits.

The children dodged into the wigwams with loud cries, the women ran screaming, Ema dropped in the grass wailing that the end of the world had come, while Siena, unable to move hand or foot, breathed another prayer to Naza of the northland.

The white man laughed, and, patting Siena's arm, he said, "No fear." Then he drew Siena away from the bank, and began to explain the meaning and use of the wonderful shooting stick. He reloaded it and fired again and yet again, until Siena understood and was all aflame at the possibilities of such a weapon.

Patiently the white man taught the Indian how to load it, sight and shoot, and how to clean it with ramrod and buckskin. Next he placed at Siena's feet a keg of powder, a bag of lead bullets, and boxes full of caps. Then he bade Siena farewell, entered the boat with his men and drifted round a bend of the swift Athabasca.

Siena stood alone upon the bank, the wonderful shooting stick in his hands, and the wail of his frightened mother in his ears. He comforted her, telling her the white men were gone, that he was safe, and that the prophecy of his birth had at last begun its fulfillment. He carried the precious ammunition to a safe hiding-place in a hollow log near his wigwam and then he plunged into the forest.

Siena bent his course toward the runways of the moose. He walked in a kind of dream, for he both feared and believed. Soon the glimmer of water, splashes and widening ripples, caused him to crawl stealthily through the ferns and grasses to the border of a pond. The familiar hum of flies told him of the location of his quarry. The moose had taken to the water, driven by the swarms of black flies, and were standing neck-deep, lifting their muzzles to feed on the drooping poplar branches. Their wide-spreading antlers, tipped back into the water, made the ripples.

Trembling as never before, Siena sank behind a log. He was within fifty paces of the moose. How often in that very spot had he strung a feathered arrow and shot it vainly! But now he had the white man's weapon, charged with lightning and thunder. Just then the poplars parted above the shore, disclosing a bull in the act of stepping down. He tossed his antlered head at the cloud of humming flies, then stopped, lifting his nose to scent the wind.

"Naza!" whispered Siena in his swelling throat.

He rested the shooting stick on the log and tried to see over the brown barrel. But his eyes were dim. Again he whispered a prayer to Naza. His sight cleared, his shaking arms stilled, and with his soul waiting, hoping, doubting, he aimed and pulled the trigger.

Boom!

High the moose flung his ponderous head, to crash down upon his knees, to roll in the water and churn a bloody foam, and then lie still.

"Siena! Siena!"

Shrill the young chief's exultant yell pealed over the listening waters, piercing the still forest, to ring back in echo from Old Stoneface. It was Siena's triumphant call to his forefathers, watching him from the silence.

The herd of moose plowed out of the pond and crashed into the woods, where, long after they had disappeared, their antlers could be heard cracking the saplings.

When Siena stood over the dead moose his doubts fled; he was indeed god-chosen. No longer chief of a starving tribe! Reverently and with immutable promise he raised the shooting stick to the north, toward Naza who had remembered him; and on the south, where dwelt the enemies of his tribe, his dark glance brooded wild and proud and savage.

Eight times the shooting stick boomed out in the stillness and eight moose lay dead in the wet grasses. In the twilight Siena wended his way home and placed eight moose tongues before the whimpering squaws.

"Siena is no longer a boy," he said. "Siena is a hunter. Let his women go bring in the meat."

Then to the rejoicing and feasting and dancing of his tribe he turned a deaf ear, and in the night passed alone under the shadow of Old Stoneface, where he walked with the spirits of his ancestors and believed the voices on the wind.

Before the ice locked the ponds Siena killed a hundred moose and reindeer. Meat and fat and oil and robes changed the world for the Crow tribe.

Fires burned brightly all the long winter; the braves awoke from their stupor and chanted no more; the women sang of the Siena who had come, and prayed for summer wind and moonlight to bring his bride.

Spring went by, summer grew into

blazing autumn, and Siena's fame and the wonder of the shooting stick spread through the length and breadth of the land.

Another year passed, then another, and Siena was the great chief of the rejuvenated Crows. He had grown into a warrior's stature, his face had the beauty of the god-chosen, his eye the falcon flash of the Sienas of old. Long communion in the shadow of Old Stone-face had added wisdom to his other gifts; and now to his worshiping tribe all that was needed to complete the prophecy of his birth was the coming of the alien bride.

It was another autumn, with the wind whipping the tamaracks and moaning in the pines, and Siena stole along a brown, fern-lined trail. The dry smell of fallen leaves filled his nostrils; he tasted snow in the keen breezes. The flowers were dead, and still no dark-eyed bride sat in his wigwam. Siena sorrowed and strengthened his heart to wait. He saw her flitting in the shadows around him, a wraith with dusky eyes veiled by dusky wind-blown hair, and ever she hovered near him, whispering from every dark pine, from every waving tuft of grass.

To her whispers he replied, "Siena waits."

He wondered of what alien tribe she would come. He hoped not of the unfriendly Chippewayans or the far-distant Blackfeet; surely not of the hostile Crees, life enemies of his tribe, destroyers of its once puissant strength, jealous now of its resurging power.

Other shadows flitted through the forest, spirits that rose silently from the graves over which he trod, and warned him of double steps on his trail, of unseen foes watching him from the dark coverts. His braves had repeated gossip, filterings from stray Indian wanderers, hinting of plots against the risen Siena. To all these he gave no heed, for was not he Siena, god-chosen, and had he not the wonderful shooting stick?

It was the season that he loved, when dim forest and hazy fernland spoke most impellingly. The tamaracks talked to him, the poplars bowed as he passed, and the pines sang for him alone. The dying vines twined about his feet and clung to him, and the brown ferns, curling sadly, waved him a welcome that was a farewell. A bird twittered a plaintive note and a loon whistled a lonely call. Across the wide gray hollows and meadows of white moss moaned the north wind, bending all before it, blowing full into Siena's face with its bitter promise. The lichen-covered rocks and the rugged-barked trees and the creatures that moved among them—the whole world of earth and air heard Siena's step on the rustling leaves and a thousand voices hummed in the autumn stillness.

So he passed through the shadowy forest and over the gray muskeg flats to his hunting-place. With his birch-bark horn he blew the call of the moose. He alone of hunting Indians had the perfect moose call. There, hidden within a thicket, he waited, calling and listening till an angry reply bellowed from the depths of a hollow, and a bull moose, snorting fight, came cracking the saplings in his rush. When he sprang fierce and bristling into the glade, Siena killed him. Then, laying his shooting stick over a log, he drew his knife and approached the beast.

A snapping of twigs alarmed Siena and he whirled upon the defensive, but too late to save himself. A band of In-

dians pounced upon him and bore him to the ground. One wrestling heave Siena made, then he was overpowered and bound. Looking upward, he knew his captors, though he had never seen them before; they were the lifelong foes of his people, the fighting Crees.

A sturdy chief, bronze of face and sinister of eye, looked grimly down upon his captive. "Baroma makes Siena a slave."

Siena and his tribe were dragged far southward to the land of the Crees. The young chief was bound upon a block in the center of the village where hundreds of Crees spat upon him, beat him, and outraged him in every way their cunning could devise. Siena's gaze was on the north and his face showed no sign that he felt the torments.

At last Baroma's old advisers stopped the spectacle, saying, "This is a man!"

Siena and his people became slaves of the Crees. In Baroma's lodge, hung upon caribou antlers, was the wonderful shooting stick with Siena's powder horn and bullet pouch, objects of intense curiosity and fear.

None knew the mystery of this lightning flashing, thunder dealing thing; none dared touch it.

The heart of Siena was broken; not for his shattered dreams or the end of his freedom, but for his people. His fame had been their undoing. Slaves to the murderers of his forefathers! His spirit darkened, his soul sickened; no more did sweet voices sing to him on the wind, and his mind dwelt apart from his body among shadows and dim shapes.

Because of his strength he was worked like a dog at hauling packs and carrying wood; because of his fame he was set to cleaning fish and washing vessels with the squaws. Seldom did he get to speak a word to his mother or any of his people. Always he was driven.

One day, when he lagged almost fainting, a maiden brought him water to drink. Siena looked up, and all about him suddenly brightened, as when sunlight bursts from cloud.

"Who is kind to Siena?" he asked, drinking.

"Baroma's daughter," replied the maiden.

"What is her name?"

Quickly the maiden bent her head, veiling dusky eyes with dusky hair. "Emihiyah."

"Siena has wandered on lonely trails and listened to voices not meant for other ears. He has heard the music of Emihiyah on the winds. Let the daughter of Siena's great foe not fear to tell of her name."

"Emihiyah means a wind kiss on the flowers in the moonlight," she whispered shyly and fled.

Love came to the last of the Sienas and it was like a glory. Death shuddered no more in Siena's soul. He saw into the future, and out of his gloom he rose again, god-chosen in his own sight, with such added beauty to his stern face and power to his piercing eye and strength to his lofty frame that the Crees quailed before him and marveled. Once more sweet voices came to him, and ever on the soft winds were songs of the dewy moorlands to the northward, songs of the pines and the laugh of the loon and of the rushing, green-white, thundering Athabasca, godforsaken river.

Siena's people saw him strong and patient, and they toiled on, unbroken, faithful. While he lived, the pride of

Baroma was vaunting. "Siena waits" were the simple words he said to his mother, and she repeated them as wisdom. But the flame of his eye was like the leaping Northern Lights, and it kept alive the fire deep down in their breasts.

In the winter when the Crees lolled in their wigwams, when less labor fell to Siena, he set traps in the snow trails for silver fox and marten. No Cree had ever been such a trapper as Siena. In the long months he captured many furs, with which he wrought a robe the like of which had not before been the delight of a maiden's eye. He kept it by him for seven nights, and always during this time his ear was turned to the wind. The seventh night was the night of the midwinter feast, and when the torches burned bright in front of Baroma's lodge Siena took the robe and, passing slowly and stately till he stood before Emihiyah, he laid it at her feet.

Emihiyah's dusky face paled, her eyes that shone like stars drooped behind her flying hair, and all her slender body trembled.

"Slave!" cried Baroma, leaping erect. "Come closer that Baroma may see what kind of a dog approaches Emihiyah."

Siena met Baroma's gaze, but spoke no word. His gift spoke for him. The hated slave had dared to ask in marriage the hand of the proud Baroma's daughter. Siena towered in the firelight with something in his presence that for a moment awed beholders. Then the passionate and untried braves broke the silence with a clamor of the wolf pack.

Tillimanqua, wild son of Baroma, strung an arrow to his bow and shot it into Siena's hip, where it stuck, with feathered shaft quivering.

The spring of the panther was not swifter than Siena; he tossed Tillimanqua into the air and, flinging him down, trod on his neck and wrenched the bow away. Siena pealed out the long-drawn war whoop of his tribe that had not been heard for a hundred years, and the terrible cry stiffened the Crees in their tracks.

Then he plucked the arrow from his hip and, fitting it to the string, pointed the gory flint head at Tillimanqua's eyes and began to bend the bow. He bent the tough wood till the ends almost met, a feat of exceeding great strength, and thus he stood with brawny arms knotted and stretched.

A scream rent the suspense. Emihiyah fell upon her knees. "Spare Emihiyah's brother!"

Siena cast one glance at the kneeling maiden, then, twanging the bow string, he shot the arrow toward the sky.

"Baroma's slave is Siena," he said, with scorn like the lash of a whip. "Let the Cree learn wisdom."

Then Siena strode away, with a stream of dark blood down his thigh, and went to his brush tepee, where he closed his wound.

In the still watches of the night, when the stars blinked through the leaves and the dew fell, when Siena burned and throbbed in pain, a shadow passed between his weary eyes and the pale light. And a voice that was not one of the spirit voices on the wind called softly over him, "Siena! Emihiyah comes."

The maiden bound the hot thigh with a soothing balm and bathed his fevered brow. Then her hands found his in tender touch, her dark face bent low to his, her hair lay upon his cheek.

"Emihiyah keeps the robe," she said.

"Siena loves Emihiyah," he replied.

"Emihiyah loves Siena," she whispered.

She kissed him and stole away.

On the morrow Siena's wound was as if it had never been; no eye saw his pain. Siena returned to his work and his trapping. The winter melted into spring, spring flowered into summer, summer withered into autumn.

Once in the melancholy days Siena visited Baroma in his wigwam. "Baroma's hunters are slow. Siena sees a famine in the land."

"Let Baroma's slave keep his place among the squaws," was the reply.

That autumn the north wind came a moon before the Crees expected it; the reindeer took their annual march farther south; the moose herded warily in open groves; the whitefish did not run; and the seven-year pest depleted the rabbits.

When the first snow fell Baroma called a council and then sent his hunting braves far and wide.

One by one they straggled back to camp, footsore and hungry, and each with the same story. It was too late.

A few moose were in the forest, but they were wild and kept far out of range of the hunter's arrows, and there was no other game.

A blizzard clapped down upon the camp, and sleet and snow whitened the forest and filled the trails. Then winter froze everything in icy clutch. The old year drew to a close.

The Crees were on the brink of famine. All day and all night they kept up their chanting and incantations and beating of tom-toms to conjure the return of the reindeer. But no reindeer appeared.

It was then that the stubborn Baroma yielded to his advisers and consented to let Siena save them from starvation by means of his wonderful shooting stick. Accordingly Baroma sent word to Siena to appear at his wigwam.

Siena did not go, and said to the medicine men, "Tell Baroma soon it will be for Siena to demand."

Then the Cree chieftain stormed and stamped in his wigwam and swore away the life of his slave. Yet again the wise medicine men prevailed. Siena and the wonderful shooting stick would be the salvation of the Crees. Baroma, muttering deep in his throat like distant thunder, gave sentence to starve Siena until he volunteered to go forth to hunt, or let him be the first to die.

The last scraps of meat, except a little hoarded in Baroma's lodge, were devoured, and then began the boiling of bones and skins to make a soup to sustain life. The cold days passed and a silent gloom pervaded the camp. Sometimes a cry of a bereaved mother, mourning for a starved child, wailed through the darkness.

Siena's people, long used to starvation, did not suffer or grow weak so soon as the Crees. They were of hardier frame, and they were upheld by faith in their chief. When he would sicken it would be time for them to despair. But Siena walked erect as in the days of his freedom, nor did he stagger under the loads of firewood, and there was a light on his face. The Crees, knowing of Baroma's order that Siena should be the first to perish of starvation, gazed at the slave first in awe, then in fear. The last of the Sienas was succored by the spirits.

But god-chosen though Siena deemed himself, he knew it was not by the spirits that he was fed in this time of

famine. At night in the dead stillness, when even no mourning of wolf came over the frozen wilderness, Siena lay in his brush tepee close and warm under his blanket. The wind was faint and low, yet still it brought the old familiar voices. And it bore another sound—the soft fall of a moccasin on the snow. A shadow passed between Siena's eyes and the pale light.

"Emihiyah comes," whispered the shadow and knelt over him.

She tendered a slice of meat which she had stolen from Baroma's scant hoard as he muttered and growled in uneasy slumber. Every night since her father's order to starve Siena, Emihiyah had made this perilous errand.

And now her hand sought his and her dusky hair swept his brow. "Emihiyah is faithful," she breathed low.

"Siena only waits," he replied.

She kissed him and stole away.

Cruel days fell upon the Crees before Baroma's pride was broken. Many children died and some of the mothers were beyond help. Siena's people kept their strength, and he himself showed no effect of hunger. Long ago the Cree women had deemed him superhuman, that the Great Spirit fed him from the happy hunting grounds.

At last Baroma went to Siena. "Siena may save his people and the Crees."

Siena regarded him long, then replied, "Siena waits."

"Let Baroma know. What does Siena wait for? While he waits we die."

Siena smiled his slow, inscrutable smile and turned away.

Baroma sent for his daughter and ordered her to plead for her life.

Emihiyah came, fragile as a swaying reed, more beautiful than a rose choked in a tangled thicket, and she stood before Siena with doe eyes veiled. "Emihiyah begs Siena to save her and the tribe of Crees."

"Siena waits," replied the slave.

Baroma roared in his fury and bade his braves lash the slave. But the blows fell from feeble arms and Siena laughed at his captors.

Then, like a wild lion unleashed from long thrall, he turned upon them: "Starve! Cree dogs! Starve! When the Crees all fall like leaves in autumn, then Siena and his people will go back to the north."

Baroma's arrogance left him then, and on another day, when Emihiyah lay weak and pallid in his wigwam and the pangs of hunger gnawed at his own vitals, he again sought Siena. "Let Siena tell for what he waits."

Siena rose to his lofty height and the leaping flame of the Northern Lights gathered in his eyes. "Freedom!" One word he spoke and it rolled away on the wind.

"Baroma yields," replied the Cree, and hung his head.

"Send the squaws who can walk and the braves who can crawl out upon Siena's trail."

Then Siena went to Baroma's lodge and took up the wonderful shooting stick and, loading it, he set out upon snowshoes into the white forest. He knew where to find the moose yards in the sheltered corners. He heard the bulls pounding the hard-packed snow and cracking their antlers on the trees. The wary beasts would not have allowed him to steal close, as a warrior armed with a bow must have done, but Siena fired into the herd at long range. And when they dashed off, sending the snow up like a spray, a huge black bull lay dead.

Siena followed them as they floun-

dered through the drifts, and whenever he came within range he shot again. When five moose were killed he turned upon his trail to find almost the whole Cree tribe had followed him and were tearing the meat and crying out in a kind of crazy joy. That night the fires burned before the wigwams, the earthen pots steamed, and there was great rejoicing.

Siena hunted the next day, and the next, and for ten days he went into the white forest with his wonderful shooting stick, and eighty moose fell to his unerring aim. The famine was broken and the Crees were saved.

When the mad dances ended and the feasts were over, Siena appeared before Baroma's lodge. "Siena will lead his people northward."

Baroma, starving, was a different chief from Baroma well fed and in no pain. All his cunning had returned.

"Siena goes free. Baroma gave his word. But Siena's people remain slaves."

"Siena demanded freedom for himself and people," said the younger chief.

"Baroma heard no word of Siena's tribe. He would not have granted freedom for them. Siena's freedom was enough."

"The Cree twists the truth. He knows Siena would not go without his people. Siena might have remembered Baroma's cunning. The Crees were ever liars."

Baroma stalked before his fire with haughty presence. About him in the circle of light sat his medicine men, his braves and squaws.

"The Cree is kind. He gave his word. Siena is free. Let him take his wonderful shooting stick and go back to the north."

Siena laid the shooting stick at Baroma's feet and likewise the powder horn and bullet pouch. Then he folded his arms, and his falcon eyes looked far beyond Baroma to the land of the changing lights and the old home on the green-white, rushing Athabasca, godforsaken river. "Siena stays."

Baroma stared in amazement and anger. "Siena make Baroma's word idle. Begone!"

"Siena stays!"

The look of Siena, the pealing reply, for a moment held the chief mute. Slowly Baroma stretched wide his arms and lifted them, while from his face flashed a sullen wonder. "Great Slave!" he thundered.

So was respect forced from the soul of the Cree, and the name thus wrung from his jealous heart was one to live forever in the lives and legends of Siena's people.

Baroma sought the silence of his lodge, and his medicine men and braves dispersed, leaving Siena standing in the circle, a magnificent statue facing the steely north.

From that day insult was never offered to Siena, nor word spoken to him by the Crees, nor work given. He was free to come and go where he willed, and he spent his time in lessening the tasks of his people.

The trails of the forest were always open to him, as were the streets of the Cree village. If a brave met him, it was to step aside; if a squaw met him, it was to bow her head; if a chief met him, it was to face him as warriors faced warriors.

One twilight Emihiyah crossed his path, and suddenly she stood as once before, like a frail reed about to break in the wind. But Siena passed on. The days went by and each one brought less labor to Siena's people, until that

one came wherein there was no task save what they set themselves. Siena's tribe were slaves, yet not slaves.

The winter wore by and the spring and the autumn, and again Siena's fame went abroad on the four winds. The Chippewayans journeyed from afar to see the Great Slave, and likewise the Blackfeet and the Yellow Knives. Honor would have been added to fame, councils called, overtures made to the somber Baroma on behalf of the Great Slave; but Siena passed to and fro among his people, silent and cold to all others, true to the place which his great foe had given him. Captive to a lesser chief, they said; the Great Slave who would yet free his tribe and gather to him a new and powerful nation.

Once in the late autumn Siena sat brooding in the twilight by Ema's tepee. That night all who came near him were silent. Again Siena was listening to voices on the wind, voices that had been still for long, which he had tried to forget. It was the north wind, and it whipped the spruces and moaned through the pines. In its cold breath it bore a message to Siena, a hint of coming winter and a call from Naza, far north of the green-white, thundering Athabasca, river without a spirit.

In the darkness when the camp slumbered Siena faced the steely north. As he looked a golden shaft, arrow-shaped and arrow-swift, shot to the zenith.

"Naza!" he whispered to the wind. "Siena watches."

Then the gleaming, changing Northern Lights painted a picture of gold and silver bars, of flushes pink as shell, of opal fire and sunset red; and it was a picture of Siena's life from the moment the rushing Athabasca rumbled his name, to the far distant time when he would say farewell to his great nation and pass forever to the retreat of the winds. God-chosen he was, and had power to read the story in the sky.

Seven nights Siena watched in the darkness; and on the seventh night, when the golden flare and silver shafts faded in the north, he passed from tepee to tepee, awakening his people.

"When Siena's people hear the sound of the shooting stick let them cry greatly: 'Siena kills Baroma! Siena kills Baroma!'"

With noiseless stride Siena went among the wigwams and along the lanes until he reached Baroma's lodge. Entering in the dark, he groped with his hands upward to a moose's antlers and found the shooting stick. Outside he fired it into the air.

Like a lightning bolt the report ripped asunder the silence, and the echoes clapped and reclapped from the cliffs. Sharp on the dying echoes Siena bellowed his war whoop, and it was the second time in a hundred years for foes to hear that terrible, long-drawn cry.

Then followed the shrill, piercing yells of Siena's people: "Siena kills Baroma—Siena kills Baroma—Siena kills Baroma!"

The slumber of the Crees awoke to a babel of many voices; it rose hoarsely on the night air, swelled hideously into a deafening roar that shook the earth.

In this din of confusion and terror when the Crees were lamenting the supposed death of Baroma and screaming in each other's ears, "The Great Slave takes his freedom!" Siena ran to his people and, pointing to the north, drove them before him.

Single file, like a long line of flitting specters, they passed out of the fields

into the forest. Siena kept close on their trail, ever looking backward, and ready with the shooting stick.

The roar of the stricken Crees softened in his ears and at last died away.

Under the black canopy of whispering leaves, over the gray, mist-shrouded muskeg flats, around the glimmering reed-bordered ponds, Siena drove his people.

All night Siena hurried them northward and with every stride his heart beat higher. Only he was troubled by a sound like the voice that came to him on the wind.

But the wind was now blowing in his face, and the sound appeared to be at his back. It followed on his trail as had the step of destiny. When he strained his ears he could not hear it, yet when he had gone on swiftly, persuaded it was only fancy, then the voice that was not a voice came haunting him.

In the gray dawn Siena halted on the far side of a gray flat and peered through the mists on his back trail. Something moved out among the shadows, a gray shape that crept slowly, uttering a mournful cry.

"Siena is trailed by a wolf," muttered the chief.

Yet he waited, and saw that the wolf was an Indian. He raised the fatal shooting stick.

As the Indian staggered forward, Siena recognized the robe of silver fox and marten, his gift to Emihiyah. He laughed in mockery. It was a Cree trick. Tillimanqua had led the pursuit disguised in his sister's robe. Baroma would find his son dead on the Great Slave's trail.

"Siena!" came the strange, low cry.

It was the cry that had haunted him like the voice on the wind. He leaped as a bounding deer.

Out of the gray fog burned dusky eyes half-veiled by dusky hair, and little hands that he knew wavered as fluttering leaves.

"Emihiyah comes," she said.

"Siena waits," he replied.

Far to the northward he led his bride and his people, far beyond the old home on the green-white, thundering Athabasca, godforsaken river; and there, on the lonely shores of an inland sea, he fathered the Great Slave Tribe.

TRAIL-BLAZING GRUBSTAKE

When John Charles Frémont, famed "pathfinder" of the West, returned to his beloved California from the East during the early months of '49, he, too, succumbed to the gold fever. Convinced that a vast store of undiscovered riches lay dormant within his property in the San Joaquin Valley, the explorer drew up an agreement with a group of Mexicans who had accompanied him overland to Los Angeles from Sonora. His terms were simple: the Mexicans were to come with him to his property and immediately begin the search for gold; in return, he would provide horses, food, and tools for the entire crew and would divide with them the proceeds from any gold removed from his land. When Frémont made this proposal he not only established a pattern which many others were to follow, but also gave a new term to the American language, an expression familiar to all who know and love the West—the concise, forthright phrase, "'grubstake."

—Gene Hammond

Free-for-All

LES SAVAGE, JR., author of "The Hide Rustlers," the thrill-packed book-length novel in this issue of ZGWM, originally intended to be a painter. When he went to college he majored in art. But—his mother and an uncle and an aunt all being successful writers—heredity and environment proved too strong, and he turned to the typewriter. His first short story was accepted by the first magazine to which it was submitted, and he has been writing professionally ever since. "The Hide Rustlers," which will be published in book form later this year, is his third novel.

The Big Thicket, which plays such an important part in "The Hide Rustlers," is an area of some two million acres northwest of Beaumont, Texas. It is thickly timbered, with underbrush so dense that even the Indians hesitated to venture far into the region. Much of it remains unknown to this day.

● Zane Grey's legendlike story of Siena, "The Great Slave," deals with one of the most interesting of the Plains tribes. The Crows, a Siouan people, were strikingly unlike the Sioux to the white man. They were, however, great fighters, defending their homeland, Absaroka, effectively against the depredations of neighboring tribes, the Sioux being their principal enemies. The Crows were big—the tallest of the Plains Indians, handsome, and well dressed; their women were famed as tanners and tailors, turning out shirts, leggings, and robes for which other tribes, less gifted, traded eagerly. Courageous and aggressive, the Crows raided everywhere, especially for horses; they were regarded, enviously, by other Indians as the best horse thieves and, sorrowfully, as the hardest to steal horses from. Great talkers, they excelled at oratory, debating, and storytelling; they were excitable and emotional (as were all Indians, contrary to popular belief) and fun-loving. By white standards, they were "immoral," marriage being casual and easily terminated. They did not punish

for adultery—in contrast, the Blackfeet cut off the guilty squaw's nose.

● "Long Gone" is Peter Dawson's first ZGWM story, and a dramatic one. The popular author of "Gunsmoke Graze" and other fine Western novels, as well as of many short stories, hails from Pojoaque Valley, near Santa Fe. His small *ranchito* adjoins the site of a pueblo where Indian maidens were once sacrificed to the seven-headed serpent which the tribe worshiped. In his off time he hunts, fishes, and skis, calling these pursuits as close an approach as he knows in understanding the country of De Vargas, the mountain men, Kit Carson, and General Kearny. His latest novel, "Renegade Canyon," appeared serially in the *Saturday Evening Post* last summer.

● James Charles Lynch's story, "The Little Giant," is another ZGWM "first," but since, as this goes into type, we have no personal data on him, the yarn will have to speak for him—and he can write!

● Rafe Gibbs, author of "Stage Door West," was born on a homestead in Washington State, and admits he's never been able to comb the Western dust completely out of his hair. He left the Far West for the Midwest in 1936, joining the editorial staff of the Milwaukee *Journal*. In 1941 he was called to active duty with the Air Force, emerged in '46 as a colonel, and settled in Idaho, where he now concentrates on magazine article writing. Early Western history is a hobby of both him and his wife; another is children—four of 'em.

● Another top-notch Dell Book Western to watch for on the stands! It's "Last of the Longhorns," by Will Ermine—one of the best ever written by this old and extremely competent hand.

Next month: an abridgment of Zane Grey's "Code of the West," plus William MacLeod Raine, Harry Sinclair Drago, Wayne D. Overholser, and others! —THE EDITORS.

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PECCARY

THE wilder regions of Arkansas woodlands, Texas chapparal, Arizona's cactus areas, and the sandy wastelands of New Mexico harbor the collared peccary, only native pig in the United States. Ordinarily shy and peaceful, peccaries become exceedingly dangerous when provoked. Armed with long sharp tusks and musk glands second only to the skunk's in power, a herd of these wild pigs will readily attack the man who kills or wounds one of their number. Even if he reaches safety in a tree he may have to sweat out a ten- or twelve-hour siege before the enraged beasts give up and move on. A peccary hunt provides prime sport for thrill-minded Texans. Guided by a pack of hounds, a wild horseback ride generally precedes the cornering of the quarry and the kill. Peccary meat, similar to pork, is eaten with relish in some sections. The musk gland must be removed as soon as the animal is killed to prevent the meat from becoming fouled.

EARL SHERWAN

AFTER A MAVERICK. Painted by Nicholas S. Firfires